

# *Frontliner's Voyage*



# Frontliner's Voyage

by

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Dad

Of gentle speech and solemn air,  
a peace he had alone.  
His eyes were bright, his face was fair,  
a strength about him shone.  
Our home was safe while he was there,  
his wit was keen and strong.  
The friends he chose took special care  
to never do him wrong.  
While sailing on the seas he found  
a way to stem the tide.

He set my feet on solid ground  
with God before he died.  
Where now he sails I cannot say,  
alas I cannot see.  
But there I too will sail some day,  
across the peaceful sea.

RC

You will succeed if you persevere; and you will find joy in  
overcoming obstacles.

Helen Keller

## Frontliner's Voyage

### Big Boats

One day when I was 35 years old, I sat looking out my office window thinking there must be more to life than shuffling papers in this man made world. What good is money if this is all there is to life? There must be something more real to see than all of this. Surely, I thought, there is a place in nature for me with all His happy creatures in their happy and natural lives. So, even though I never met anyone who sailed a boat or seen one up close, something drew me to Seabrook, Texas to look at the big sailboats. I simply got in my car and headed south without even looking at a map, I figured I could find the ocean without one. It so happened I did and I also found a marina while driving along a roadway I never

traveled before. So I went in and parked alongside all the other cars as if I belonged there. Just as I stepped on the dock where I discovered lots of these

big things parked, I began to feel I was trespassing. The boats looked really expensive with lots of complicated stuff hanging everywhere - fascinating. They were mostly over 30 feet long and several feet wide with expensive looking windows, rails and ropes everywhere. Inside there is often a lounge area in the middle with two or three other rooms always including a bathroom and a sleeping area. Everything looks very special and very expensive and I later learned it is both. The docks were concrete walkways that float on foam squares and slide up and down on poles sunk into the bottom, which allows for the tide coming in and out. Only one boat could fit into each of the 'slips' or stalls where they float tied to the dock, which all looked about the size of swimming pools. There was a nice ocean smell in the air and sea gulls could be heard calling in the air high above, which gave the whole scene a kind of peacefulness.

There was a man on one of the boats as I rounded a corner who looked at me as I passed. I thought he would surely tell me to leave, but as I started to turn and go back, he said, "hello." So I said "you have a nice boat." Within an hour I was sailing his boat onto Galveston Bay. It was a Cal-27 that was as polished and clean as any I've seen. The 27 stands for the length of the boat, the term

Cal' is short for California, where they were once manufactured by Jensen Marine. When I stepped onto the deck the boat didn't move much. The Captain, Ray Childers, was a nice fellow, a little older than me and had been sailing for years. He said the boat was pretty stiff, which meant the deck didn't move much when you walked on it.

That whole day was a new adventure for me. He invited me on board and we talked awhile and looked at his boat. His Cal 27 looked about the same size as the other boats nearby and the deck was about 3 feet above the water. He called this a lot of free board. The Cal was equipped with a small, gasoline engine somewhere inside the back end and I could see water coming out the exhaust pipe at the back. It turns out they cool the engines of some boats with sea water, then run the water through the exhaust manifold to cool it and to get rid of the water. This way the ocean serves as a radiator to keep the engine cool. Pretty soon he untied the dock lines and we motored down the channel toward the outlet to Galveston Bay from Clear Lake. There were interesting sights, sounds and smells everywhere. There were brightly colored shrimp

boats lying tied alongside the channel and sea gulls flying everywhere, like an Old Spice commercial. The smell of those shrimp boats was a bit of a shock. I don't think they get all the critters off before they park them, which would also help explain so many seagulls there. A little farther down there was a row of restaurants and people sitting on decks outside watching the boats go by. It felt like being in some kind of show as they all looked when we passed. Then we reached the entrance to the Bay. The water looked so big and wide it was quite a while before I realized I was on a big boat and could relax. After a few minutes he told me to take the helm, left it in my uncertain hands, went to the middle of the deck and began wrestling with the big sail and a lot of rope. It looked really complicated and I expected it to get all tangled up and him to give up and sit back down. In a short time he got the sails up and the boat leaned slightly, not nearly as much as I expected, then he came back and turned off the engine. Quietness fell. The only sound was a light fluff of water from the front of the boat. I was surprised how easily the boat lumbered along and how fast the sails made it go. It seemed to me if the wind was pushing a boat that fast it should turn over. Later, I discovered those boats have tons of lead in the very bottom of the keel so even if they do somehow get knocked down they'll come back up, even if it tears off the sails and mast in the process. I never was in such a peaceful place or one so uncertain. It must be comparable to flying in a glider plane with movement and a wonderful view of the world yet, without any noise. We were traveling along speaking in low voices which was loud enough. We sailed for an hour till the land appeared to be far away from our quiet place in the middle of Galveston Bay. Then he changed our direction and finally brought us back skillfully through a narrow channel crowded with boats and hundreds of people watching from restaurants along side the Clear Lake channel entrance.

Something happened that day or something awoke in me that I knew nothing of before, like little Bilbo on his first trip to the mountain. I realized what it means to be alive and free in this world. There are wonderful things to do that promise the best this creation can deliver, but we must be willing to look at the world differently. I suddenly realized that happiness in life is not how comfortable or wealthy we can become; that only makes us old before our time. Now, I know that joy and happiness are in the same place as when we were children, and it's like Helen Keller said, "Life is either a daring



adventure, or it's nothing."

Next day, I knew roughly what was going to happen; I was going sailing one day. Every weekend was a trip to another sailboat yard. Clear Lake mostly, but I also went to Corpus Christi where I examined a Cal 29 listed in a boat trader magazine for \$10,000, but it was in such poor condition it would have only been a work project.

After a year of searching, traveling and occasionally going out on the Bay with Ray Childers, I found the boat to buy. It was a Cal 29 moored at Pier 21 in Clear Lake.



It was baby blue with a white stripe on the side below the deck. It was only two feet longer than the Cal 27 but it was quite a bit larger and weighed twice as much. A six foot person could walk inside and not touch the ceiling. The mast was a good deal taller, and it carried a lot more sail. Inside there was a bunk on each side at the rear, a couch that made into a full size bed in the middle and room for two up front in the V-berth, in all it could sleep 6 persons. It had a nice big galley and sink along the right side of the main cabin with a gas stove, refrigerator and a large icebox. On the wall behind all this were sliding panels that revealed storage for food and spices or other things.



Above that were the two long windows on each side. On the opposite side there were bookshelves under the windows. The bathroom between the main cabin and the V-berth was not very big, but it had; a marine toilet, a sink, shelf storage and a shower. The toilet emptied into the ocean and the shower emptied into the bilge to be pumped out. There were doors so that it could be separated into three different rooms. It was a one owner and I found some sawdust in one of the lower storage compartments left from the manufacturer. I figured it wasn't used much, but I was wrong about that. It turned out to be the best choice of boats for me not because of the sawdust, but because someone covered the bottom with more fiberglass. It was probably done to prevent blisters occurring inside the fiberglass while sitting in the water, but it added about five thousand pounds to the boat and a good deal more strength to the bottom that would later come in handy.

Originally named 'Cool Long', I renamed the boat 'Frontliner' after the idea in a song by Dallas Holm. Boats are always the feminine gender and she was a Marconi sloop, meaning she only carried two sails. With a mast that stood 43 feet above the water, she was twenty nine feet long, nine feet, three inches wide. I painted, polished and scrubbed for months until she looked as good as all the others around. Several things needed to be repaired or added before she could be taken out to sea safely. First, the bilge pump switch was installed upside down and it didn't work unless the bilge was empty. If water filled up to the switch in the bilge, it would have stopped working and if there

was a hole in the boat, she would sink. The first owner bought good rope but not nearly enough and the anchor was not nearly big enough. I replaced the 10 lb Danforth with a 35 lb CQR or plow and added four hundred feet of 1/2 inch, three-strand anchor rode with 100 feet of chain to the ground tackle. This would prove very valuable later on. There were times when all other boats would drag away in a storm while I stayed nicely where I put that anchor. Other little problems were not so easily solved. I never did figure out why the roller furling kept jamming, the thing that makes the front sail roll up. On the top and bottom of the front sail called the jib there were these bushings that spin around as you roll up the sail on a track around the fore stay. They would often stick and the sail would not roll up. It did that at the most inconvenient times, but I would just run up the mast steps that I installed and tie a little piece of rope on the top bushing and then to the mast so it would work fine. I don't think it was made for this boat. Finally, somewhere in the Straits of Florida I just left that little rope there. The only reason to remove it would be to change the sail and I seldom did that because the boat sailed so well with just the cruising sails. There were two other jib sails, a spinnaker and a storm jib that hardly ever got used. The largest jib was called a 160 that was so large it reached all the way back to the rear of the cockpit. It cost about three thousand dollars and was made of heavy canvas with leather reinforced grommets. I remember using it one time in the Gulf of Mexico beating to windward. The wind was dying one evening and I thought it would be fun to try it out. So up it goes, and with a wind of about ten knots I was making 6 knots beating close hauled, amazing. That means I was going really fast headed almost directly into the wind.

After removing the engine, overhauling it and replacing it by myself at Marina Del Sol, I still didn't discover the problem with the engine running poorly was a clogged fuel line. I discovered this somewhere in Louisiana past New Orleans in the midst of my trip. A taxi took me from the marina at Gulfport, Mississippi, to a local auto parts store where I picked up some neoprene fuel hose that solved the problem and far as I know that engine never missed another stroke.

I spent the following year working on the boat and learning to sail. Ray went with me and taught me quite a lot and most importantly made me do things I thought too dangerous, like sailing back down the channel and across

the lake without power. At first everything looks dangerous and most people just avoid what they should be learning to overcome to the effect most never really learn to sail their boats. It's hard to control a sailboat under sail in narrow places because of the changing winds. There must be a thousand boats on Clear Lake that never leave the dock. The owners sometimes visit them and spend money on them and invite people to come see what they have, but they never go anywhere. Another reason they never leave the dock is most people can't stop chasing dollars. There is really no place to stop. It's always just around the corner but no one ever gets enough. It's a dream many people have, no doubt among others, to let everything go and just sail away. Money is like the ring in Tolkien's Trilogy, some dream of letting go but no one ever does because it possesses them. Working in Adult Protective, social work, I noticed this pattern over and over. I saw people work until they literally could not go to work any more, then they would go home, give all their money to the doctors, and in about two years they would die. Life is a terrible thing to waste in pursuit of imaginary security or status.

During my stay at Clear Lake, it was my pleasure to meet several nice people. Some of the sharpest and most trusting were a couple named Dan and Annette Forrester, who lived in the apartments where I was keeping my boat at the time. They had a traditional, gaff rigged, clipper, wooden boat about 45 feet long. It looked like something from a Treasure Island story. We visited and helped each other working on the boats like dock mates do on weekends. We would also take short trips onto Galveston Bay from time to time. One memorable trip occurred on a fourth of July outing as we intended to sail to a nice little anchorage near Galveston Island and watch the fireworks while grilling steaks. This boat could have carried fifty people but there was only the three of us on board. We usually motored across Clear Lake and into the channel before raising the sails because of the traffic and because a boat is much easier to manage under power than under sail. Although I remember having engine trouble once and having to sail all the way down the channel, across the lake, and into my slip with no auxiliary power. That was tricky. On this day there was no such trouble. The wind was steady and low and the sky was clear. There was not much traffic on the water and it was no trouble at all sailing the thirty miles to Galveston during the day. When we got to the turnoff in Galveston where we intended to turn and follow the narrow inter-

coastal waterway channel across a large, otherwise shallow, marsh like area we encountered problems. Dan decided to go below and do something with the navigation stuff on board. He put me in charge of the helm and went below. I stood there, sailing this big traditional sailing ship behind the usual wooden wheel just like the old whaling vessels must have used. As we approached the turn the channel became very narrow and it was impossible to know how far they dug out the bottom for the channel between or beyond the channel markers. I tried to stay inside the markers just to be sure we didn't go aground. As we approached the turn I could see a barge coming from the opposite direction going about the same speed. We were about the same distance from the corner and it would have been really dangerous to meet that thing on a turn, because he needed all the room and maybe a little more to turn the corner with his 500 foot length. I became really uncomfortable at this point and spoke to Dan, below deck, saying, "I'm really not comfortable here, I don't know these waters and there is a barge coming from the other way." He said, "oh, don't worry, just stay to the right and you'll be fine." I told him I've a really bad feeling about this, but he assured me there would be no problem. Well, I've had that feeling many times before and since, and at some point I guess I'll learn to do something when it happens, but not that day. I did at least start the engine just in case. I tried to stay as far to the right as possible and out of the way or at least near enough the edge to dash to the right if he came across before we met and passed. I was not aware they put the channel markers in the wrong place, marking the corner and a lot of four foot deep water. So, just as I began to turn to the left and line up with the channel, we began to mush into mud. I immediately applied full power and steered to the left, but it was too late. We were in the goo, as they say, hard aground. Not only did we go in under full engine power but also full sail. The engine is not much compared to the sails which serve as the main power of a sailboat. You can use all the engine power and make the boat go the opposite direction with the sails. We were not likely to get out of this before the fireworks started at sundown some four hours away. Of course we tried all the tricks like carrying the anchor out in the dingy to a place we would like to be, dropping it over the side, then using the ship's wench to drag the ship to the right place. But today we were too deep in the mud. We were only likely to break the wench or the keel or something pulling at an angle of 20 degrees off the port bow. About

this time some people came up in a power boat and offered to help. It was easy to see some of them were already pretty toasted from drinking beer. We thanked them and said it wouldn't do any good and there is no reason to mess up their boat and nice things like that. About this time, I think Annette was the one who said, "look out for that anchor rope there in the water", but it was too late. By the time we could make them understand they were already over the rope and it wrapped around their propeller. So, we got to spend some time with these lovely people anyway. I've noticed life is like that. In the process of getting the rope off their boat, they cut it and let it fall to the bottom. On the other end of that rope there was a four hundred dollar, 65 pound anchor, some chain, and all the fittings that connect such things. Now we were there without an anchor. The party people left and we decided to grill the steaks and call someone to get us off the bottom. The steaks were good. The tow boat arrived about 6 hours later because they said the tide was going out when we went aground and there would be nothing they could do until more water arrived. Sure enough, when they arrived you could still walk around the boat in waist deep water. Within three hours they were able to dig us out using the prop wash of twin, eight cylinder racing engines with large propellers. They tied ropes onto the docking cleats at the rear of our boat and the same on theirs and just raced the engines until the water washed us out of the mud. But this must have blown away the anchor rope because we were never able to find it again and it was all lost. On the positive side, we could see three sets of fireworks from where we were grilling the steaks and the breeze was the same as where we intended to go only about 2 miles away. On the down side, Dan dropped about seven hundred dollars on the anchor and the towing bill. Things happen and we learn as we go.

## The Dogs

One of the funniest things I ever saw happened while I was staying overnight on my boat near the apartment of my friends Dan and Annette. One early morning as I doodled about inside before the day began, I heard the sound of someone whistling to call a dog. So unusually clear and perfect was the whistle that I looked out to see who the person might be and watch the result. My eyes scanned the small area of apartment doors about 50 yards

away, oddly failing to see anyone that should have been clearly visible where the sound emitted. Then suddenly round the corner of the building came a cavalry of house dogs running up to stand barking and looking all around confused near one of the door steps. I looked even harder for someone or perhaps a window where someone might be sitting near to explain the event, when there came the most contagious laugh from the same mysterious location, obviously directed at the dogs for being so confused. Then suddenly the reality of the whole event came bursting to my mind and bent me over with laughter when I realized it was a parrot in a golden cage, hanging over the doorstep that managed the event. Without help or enticement the bird detected the dogs and called them to the door only to laugh at them in the most classical and human fashion you can imagine.

## Beginning the trip

After learning to sail my boat and spending lots of money on it, I ended my career with the Parole Division in Texas. I just quit after spending ten years in government work and five years supervising parolees. I had about \$10,000.00, the boat and a car which I returned in exchange for what I owed on it. Most of the things I owned went into the dumpster. Furniture went to friends at work. All my extra clothing went to Good Will and I was ready to make final changes and prepare for my journey. There seems to be no place to stop getting a boat ready for the sea.

I met several nice people at the docks at Clear Lake who helped me find things I needed like an Autohelm which steers the boat automatically. With help from a girl named Erica, who owned a boat at Seabrook, I was able to get a used Autohelm for \$250.00 from someone she knew. The Autohelm is a two foot long rectangle that attaches to the tiller on one end, to the boat on the other and has some high tech instruments inside with a worm gear that makes corrections according to changes in a magnetic heading. If the boat turns even one degree it automatically moves the tiller until the course is corrected. It can steer the boat much better than a person and never gets tired. After using it I cannot imagine sailing without two of them. At the time they cost about \$650.00 new. I found more things that needed to be changed or added and discovered all this can get expensive. Simple little fittings that connect the

standing rigging to the deck cost about \$45.00 each. I bought a nice commercial Single Side Band radio for \$250.00 and made the Backstay into a 33 foot antenna using glass high line insulators. I installed a hand operated bilge pump in the rear Lazarette, a depth finder from Walmart and a new VHF radio. I put a new coax inside the mast and insulated all the wires in the mast with pieces of foam on a string, pulling it through from top to bottom to stop the ringing when the boat rocked, which will drive you crazy. I hauled the boat, repainted the bottom with paint that cost \$150.00 per gallon and was ready to try my hand at sailing alone. I had never been on the ocean.

One day in November, 1992, I walked past my friends, Chuck and Lori Harvel, on the dock at Marina Del Sol and said, "I'll see you later, I'm going to Isla Mujeres." He still remembers being amazed at me saying that so casually. All of them got off their boats and gathered around as I was preparing to leave as if they didn't believe it. My plan was to sail to Galveston, spend the night there and after a front passed during the night, follow it across the Gulf, 667 miles. I had a Garman global positioning system the size of a pocket radio that gives your location anywhere in the world within a few yards, even in a storm. It works with anything from 4 to 40 volts and has a battery pack or a mounting bracket for ships power. On board was twenty gallons of fresh water in five gallon containers and the on board tank held about the same. With waves and wishes of good luck and a few nautical maxims from the mates on the dock, I backed Frontliner out of the slip and motored away. I did not intend ever coming back.

The wind that day was blowing about twenty knots from the north and I thought that was a lot of wind. It was blowing about the same from the south when I came back and it made me laugh.

By evening I reached the Tea Cup anchorage near the yacht club at Galveston, Texas. The bilge pump was coming on all day pumping water out of the bottom of the keel. I had to find where the water was coming in or the boat could sink. It took about an hour to unpack the rear of the boat as that seemed to be where the water was coming in. Sure enough there was a tiny crack about half an inch long and wide as a piece of paper at the bottom of the cockpit drain that was allowing a tiny trickle when water slopped into the drain from the waves that kept filling up the bilge. Using some neat stuff called "Underwater Epoxy" I found earlier at a hardware store, I stopped the



leak and repacked the supplies. That night it was my job to listen for the bilge pump to make sure the leak was stopped and to watch the weather. If that tiny leak was below the waterline, say around a thru-hull fitting or something, I might have been able to reach a boat yard from where I was before she sank, maybe. That's how fast they go down with all the lead in the bottom. A single bullet hole under the water line would sink a boat in about 20 minutes if not plugged with something. Imagine what a 50 caliber machine gun would do fired several times through the hull, little did I know I would one day have to think about that while sailing Frontliner.

While anchored near the commercial docks there in Galveston, in the night a large ship was leaving the docks. My view of this large ship, about 900 feet long, gave new meaning to the words big and heavy. It tried to use it's own power to get going and went out of control spinning sideways and going aground headed right for me, only stopping a few yards in front of me. Tugboats were pushing and pulling on it to get it headed in the right direction and the water under my boat became a muddy torrent. I thought it would come over and squash me like a bug any time as it loomed above me in the night about 20 yards away. Finally, they managed to get it moving and I was very relieved to see it pass by. Then I couldn't sleep the rest of the night there.

The wind came about midnight. It blew about thirty knots, but there was not much rain. I didn't use my big anchor since I thought I was in a protected place. The boat began to drag and the rocky shore was only about fifty yards away down wind. I threw other anchors out and started the engine to help keep the boat off the rocks. Starting the engine did the trick. Apparently the bottom is hard mud there and the anchors would not bury themselves.

When morning came, I was still awake and during the night my TV fell and broke during the storm. It wouldn't be the last time something like that happened. I did have some success making blueberry muffins on top of the stove though. I felt fortunate just to be in one piece and decided it must surely get better. Then I started the engine and pulled in all three anchors. They were all fowled with black, sticky mud. While fueling at the nearby dock, the anchor that would not hold fell into deep water beside the dock as I was cleaning off the mud. I just left it there. I motored in the direction of the jetty and dodged the ferryboat full of cars and people that used the same waterway as the ships, fishing boats and pleasure craft. They were all much larger than

my little sailboat and I was the only one headed to the open sea.

Leaving the jetty and entering the real ocean there was a wall of green colored water about seven feet tall just standing there. It was caused by the large amount of water being pulled by the tide from the bay through the small opening to the sea and the surge of the sea driven by the wind in the opposite direction. When I crossed that point water came over the bow of my boat which was nearly six feet above. Beyond that, the sea was a gentle swell with very little wind. It didn't matter much which way I started since my course was into the wind. I couldn't head straight to my destination yet. I set sail almost due south and watched as the oil wells slowly crawled past. Then I began to feel a little funny. I didn't consider seasickness and didn't guess it would affect me. In an attempt to stop the problem in advance, I began taking Dramamine tablets about every four hours. The instructions on the bottle apparently represent the maximum dosage. I would find less than that amount makes some people sick.

Night began to fall on the ocean and it struck me that maybe I had not considered everything about this lonely adventure. To offset those thoughts I noticed that sunset on the ocean is remarkable. There is nothing to interfere with the scene. The orange and blue and yellow simply stop where the dark blue water makes a straight, horizontal line around your world. The bottom half of the world is a living mosaic that constantly changes by sight and feel. The waves you see around you are just like the ones you feel lifting and dropping the boat. At sea the visual world is limited by the curve of the earth and you can only see about seven miles at sea level. Seeing these natural boundaries somehow reminded me of our place in this world. It's altogether humbling.

Unfamiliar fears began to arise in my mind as I sailed some hundred miles into the darkness of the Gulf, leaving what seemed my entire life behind. Then I remembered the boundary line marked on the charts of the old days that says, "Beyond here there be Dragons." Many theories have arisen to explain that boundary but in that darkness and at later times, I contrived another explanation. There is a point that is beyond reach of help and comfort whether on land or at sea where you realize you are really separated from civilization. At sea, it's often when you can no longer see land and there is nothing but the water and the sky and it feels like God is watching you. At

this point thoughts arise that would not do so any other time and life becomes much more like a dream. That's when some people go berserk. For some the line may be a hundred miles and for others it may be a thousand, but some place on some dark night far from home and any comfort, there is a place where everyone can find out what dragons are inside themselves. Beyond there some people become dragons.

I was never too attached to this life anyway and I don't think there's much to lose here so I just tried to think about something else. It soon became easy to think of something else, I got sick from taking too many dramamine pills. It was not a nauseous feeling so much as like being poisoned or having a hangover. When I'm sick I don't like doing anything. Here I began to discover anew that like it or not, many things have to be done anyway. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon the second day out when I decided to turn back to Galveston. I was out one and a half days and all I wanted to do was dock somewhere and go to sleep. Sleep is what I wanted most and I soon discovered it was the last thing I was likely to get.

I turned the boat around and headed back to Galveston. The next thing to happen amazed me. Only about a hundred yards from where I turned around the wind changed. Suddenly it was no longer from the east, now it was coming from the northwest. I could just barely make Galveston on my heading with this wind. After a couple hours I noticed the wind was changing again and this time changed my course from Galveston towards Port Arthur. Oh no, and the night began to come again and I wished I could go to sleep. It would not be the last time I wished that. It occurred to me that if I went to sleep in the midst of the hundreds of oil wells I would hit one, sink and wake up in the water or not at all. This made me really sad. I think I could actually feel my spirit getting older with these thoughts. I must have grown a lot during these days, I know I suffered a lot.

After three days out I was headed back and still sick. The only thing I could stand to drink was pineapple soda. Water tasted so bitter I couldn't drink it, which is how I determined I was taking too much dramamine. The only thing that tasted good was canned peaches. So, for all the days I was out in the Gulf, all I ate was canned peaches and pineapple soda. I sailed as close to the wind as I could and still I was not headed to Port Arthur. Soon I realized I would be lucky to make a Lake Charles heading, even further east and not the

direction I wanted to go. I changed course again. The ocean was rough now, about six foot waves and getting bigger. Night came on the ocean again and once again, on my longest day, I saw the moon rise and shine across the glittering, black waves. Even in all this discomfort and sickness there was such a remarkable beauty about the sea. On the ocean at night the stars go all the way to the water in every direction and are magnified closer to the horizon. They're so bright in fact they are a hazard to navigation. It's hard to distinguish the lights of a ship from the stars. The sky was clean, the water was clean, the air was fresh and the stars were bright overhead and in the water behind, stirred up by the boat. What? Looking back in the water I thought I was hallucinating. There was a million little green stars trailing out behind my boat. Turns out I wasn't and it's a sea creature that glows in the dark called Dinoflagellates. The water is so clear it looks black if you look straight down even in the daytime. I was standing on the back of the boat looking down this night when I noticed a trail of stars like green diamond dust following me. There must have been millions of them because the waves made their own light in the darkness and I was making a trail of stars like the Milky Way with my boat. I stood and watched this for half an hour until I was forced to sit down and rest. The constant heaving of the boat over the waves takes a lot of energy out of you even sitting down. Times like this told me I was doing the right thing. I could never have guessed there were such things in the world or what it's like to see them in person. Whatever this trip cost in time or money, I knew then it was worth it.

The sun came up on the fourth day and my fingers were swollen, I guess because of toxins they say only leave the body during REM sleep. I thought I could feel my blood burning inside my veins as it pumped around. I was trying to not think about sleep but focus on the problem at hand, how to get to land. After my soda and peaches I trimmed and re-trimmed the sails as always trying to make the best speed and heading when the wind began to change again. There was still not a cloud in the sky but the wind kept increasing daily and now it was about thirty five knots but the waves were either about the same size or my ability to remember the day before was waning. I was probably dehydrated. The new course was now Vermilion Bay, Louisiana, a place I noticed on the map with an entrance I might be able to get into. I was thinking since the wind was coming from the land the water might be smooth

near the shore and I could enter the Bay and anchor. I beat to windward, meaning I sailed as close to the wind as possible all day and watched Portuguese man o' wars, similar to jellyfish, drift past like blue oblong bubbles with poisonous things hanging down in the water. Everything about the ocean can be cruel if you approach it carelessly. I think the idea is to understand it. The sun began to set on my fourth day and I became anxious. I didn't know people could function this long without sleep. I remembered once while in college, a friend named Scott and I drove to Galveston and went fishing. We stayed up over forty hours before we finally slept on the beach. During the night I got up, got in the car, started it and drove away -- still asleep. I remember waking up while driving down a very unfamiliar road. That was really scary and I was wondering what effect some stunt like that might have on my situation out here, out here far from any help. I started the engine, tightened up the sails and tried motor sailing to reach land. Counting the lost sleep before leaving because of the storm this was the fifth night I missed getting sleep.

On the night after the fifth day the wind increased and turned due north. I tried to make a new heading for New Orleans but could not even make that. My GPS said I was within fifty miles of the coast, but I could no longer head that way. Little did I know I was missing the biggest waves because I was in shallower water as I got closer to land. It was about three o'clock of my fifth or sixth night, I lost count at this point, when I was forced by the increasing winds to turn and run from the wind which carried me into deep water again. I was lying a-hull trying to take down the mainsail when the main halyard left my grasp. It began swinging like a sword of Damocles with a piece of stainless steel on the end. I could hear it slicing the air when it went by my head as I grabbed for it again and again. Finally I got a boat hook and began reaching for it while straddling the boom and holding the mast with the other hand. It was foolish but I was not using very good judgment at the time. I did, however, have on a harness and safety line.

I thought I solved the problem because the line stopped swinging around when I noticed the stars disappearing from the sky to the west. There was a blackness, an uneven horizon crawling up the sky making all the stars disappear. I sat there amazed, watching and said aloud, "What's making the stars disappear?" It still never occurred to my dull mind that it was a wave of

water until it hit. First the boat went sharply down like the water was pulled from underneath it. Then it tilted sideways and began rushing upward so fast that the g-force made me feel so heavy I could hardly move. Then I was on top and the stars came back along with the wind. This wave must have been over 30 feet high because the stars disappeared up to around 50 degrees above the horizon while the boat only tilted a little sideways and no water came into the cockpit so the only feeling was one of wonder. I'm glad I couldn't see that wave in the dark, even though it was just the first of many more as I was blown out into deeper water. I'm sure it would have been a fearful sight.

I never caught the halyard but it finally wrapped itself around the Back Stay so it was out of the way. The boat could easily sail with just the jib sail. It was time to look to the boat and these new, big waves. Next I let out a little jib and turned the boat down wind. Running from those waves was not as scary as catching them abeam to. At one point I feared they were going to break over the back of the boat as they lumbered up from behind, towering above me with a rushing noise and frothy white tops, which was the only thing I could see in the dark. I put a gallon of oil in the cockpit drain and punched a small hole in the plastic jug so it would trickle out. It was amazing. The water was white and breaking on both sides of the boat but no longer behind me for a space of about twenty five yards across. I guess it was worth while to read those old sailing books after all. When researching all this ocean activity, I happened on a book called, *Two Years Before The Mast*. It was about a college professor in England who traveled to the Pacific coast and worked on a whaling ship for two years. He said when the storms came, they would let out a little whale oil at the back to calm the sea and prevent waves from breaking over the boat.

Frontliner sat nicely in that posture between the huge waves and the wind was considerably less, almost comfortable, while the sound of wind in the rigging above whistled like in the movies. Of course, it's often much more comfortable when you're going the wrong direction.

About four o'clock in the morning I decided to call for some assistance from one of the rigs I could see and there were many, so many it looks like a scattered city as far as you can see at night. I decided I might tie up to one of these and get some sleep and the people on the rig might give me a hand. Thinking was becoming more difficult by now as I was becoming ambivalent

and giddy. I picked out one of the brightest rigs and made for it. After not being able to reach anyone on the radio I noticed I must have stepped on or kicked the radio because all the little push buttons were sunk back into the shell so that I could hardly reach them, and I noticed no one was answering my calls. Next plan was to set off some emergency flares. The boat was beginning to sputter and run poorly and I thought it was running out of gas. About this time I noticed one of the lower shrouds that holds up the mast swinging because it unscrewed itself some time during the night. I didn't care enough to go forward and screw it back together. I pulled out a six gallon fuel container from storage and put it into the gas fill. Then I threw the can overboard because I was just going to light some flares and I didn't want the boat to catch fire. Turns out, that was a good move, because when I got back, there were little burn marks all around the cockpit and on the cockpit cushion. Just as with the radio, no one responded to the flares or the fire works I set off. I discovered you need those \$50.00 rocket flares that go 1000 feet and last a few minutes if you want anyone to respond. Anything less just doesn't get noticed.

## A Steel Oasis

I approached a rig anyway and was going to get off with or without anyone's help. Coming up from downwind I put the boat in neutral and ran to the front, grabbed the fifteen pound Danforth anchor with 25 feet of chain and twirled it around a few times letting it go at the rig. It looked like a Pachinko ball bouncing off everything until finally falling in the water. By this time the boat drifted away from the rig in the fifteen foot waves that were the more common between big ones, so I ran to the back again, put it back in gear and approach the rig. This happened five times until I was so tired I was afraid I was going to lose my strength and be forced to sail more days and nights. Finally, I decided to let the boat run and just get off when it hit the rig. If I lost the boat, so what. When I reached the rig this time, I let it bump the rail and just ran to the front and jumped over the handrail onto the walkway. Then I looked at the boat just sitting there not moving up or down. So I got back on, grabbed the anchor and got back off. Still the boat just stayed there for a minute while I wedged the anchor in the handrail. Then another wave came

along and the boat went up and the mast hit one of the walkways on the deck above. As I watched for a minute it was still floating, so I figured the mast was not driven through the bottom. Then I walked up the stairs leaving all my worldly possessions on board, the boat lights still on and the ignition key was on, or I may have turned it off, I can't remember. I noticed a coil of rope hanging on a pipe about the size of my anchor rope, so I took it down, went back downstairs and extended the length of the rope about a hundred feet with the anchor in the middle. I remember seeing the anchor come out of the water when a wave passed and the boat lurched back like a bucking horse, then the anchor would sink again as the wave passed. I knew it would do this over and over and buffet the tremendous force on the rope. Then I went up the stairs smiling like I was headed to heaven and all by trials were over.

Finding what they call a dog house on the third floor of this large oil rig, I lay down on the curiously unmoving floor, closed my eyes and tried to let everything go. It was surprisingly hard to get to sleep. I discovered later it's common to find it hard to sleep after being in a high stress survival mode for days. When sleep finally comes it's common to lose touch with recent time and wake to a state of emergency that occurred a few days earlier. One example I remember as a couple of my friends, who were up about eight days from Galveston to Pensacola, experienced similar trouble with storms. When they were finally docked and Lori went to sleep two days after, in the night she awoke, sat up and announced, "honey, I think I better go out and drive." We ribbed her about that for a while.

I awoke to the sound of a helicopter. Lumbering to my feet, I went outside the door of this steel oasis I had appropriated in the night. All the memories of the past week came rushing back and none seemed to be lost. I stood still trying to understand what was happening as I watched the helicopter flying away. I don't think I really appreciated the size of this rig until now. It was at least twenty stories tall and the size of an average Walmart parking lot, all made of steel. They didn't even see my 30 foot, 13 thousand pound sailboat floating alongside. I walked up the stairs anyway to see if they left anything. There were two men bent over welding on something on the top deck when I approached. I was not shaved, rested or fed very well for a week and my pants were stiff with salt like two stovepipes. I must have looked like the walking dead with dark, sunken eyes, half a beard and salt



covered clothes. When they saw me walking toward them their mouths fell open and they threw down their tools, turned and began running away. I laughed aloud at them running away because it dawned on me what they must be seeing, so they turned and came back, figuring I was not a ghost. They asked one question after another without even pausing for a breath. Then they walked over to the side of the rig and looked over to see evidence to verify the story that I arrived on a sailboat. They said they couldn't believe I was here because the wind was blowing sixty miles an hour last night. It didn't seem that bad to me, but I was tired and not thinking too well. But I did remember the wind singing in the rigging. I was pretty sure the waves were 50 feet tall hanging over me from behind too. According to the Beaufort Scale;

Beaufort number	Wind Description	Wind Speed	Wave Height	
0	Calm	0 knots	0 feet	Sea is
1	Light Air	1-3 kts	< 1/2	Ripples from ft
2	Light breeze	4-6 kts	1/2 ft (max 1)	Small v not bre
3	Gentle Breeze	7-10 kts	2 ft (max 3)	Large v white h 70 deg
4	Moderate Breeze	11-16 kts	3 ft (max 5)	Small v dust ar rigging
5	Fresh Breeze	17-21kts	6 ft (max 8)	Moder. are for  Wind fr bendin whistle
6	Strong Breeze	22-27 kts	9 ft (max 12)	Large v some s  Wind s balanc slightly extend
7	Near Gale	28-33 kts	13 ft (max 19)	Sea he the dir Smoke rigging Oilskin
8	Gale	34-40 kts	18 ft (max 25)	Moder. spindri pushed inflate straight
9	Strong Gale	41-47 kts	23 ft (max 32)	High w topple,
10	Storm	48-55 kts	29 ft (max 41)	Very hi blown whitish affecte
11	Violent Storm	56-63 kts	37 ft (max 52)	Except behind along t froth. v
12	Hurricane	64+ kts	45+ ft	The air

They said they couldn't even come to work because the weather was so bad. Norman is the only name I can remember but both were really nice to me. They showed me another little cabin where there was food and beds until they could call their supervisor to see what to do with me. I chose the bed.

Shortly, they came into the little cabin and called me. It didn't matter because I couldn't sleep anyway. They said I couldn't stay on the rig because of the insurance, but I could take a helicopter ride over to the main rig a couple miles away where I could have a hot meal and wash my clothes. It was then I noticed my jeans were round and stiff like stove pipes from the salt in the air and the spray from the waves over the past week. Then I discovered something I never dreamed would be so; I don't like helicopters. I guess I just don't trust machinery enough to hang like a gnat over sudden death, all depending on human design, care and maintenance of some machine built by the cheapest bidder. After a short flight in that noisy and expensive little insect-copter we landed on the main rig. They gave me some food from an earlier meal that tasted all right but I think I would have liked peaches and pineapple soda better.

When I awoke about 11:00 pm, I had slept the clock around. They said they called the Coast Guard in the night upon orders from the management and the Coast Guard was now here. Then I got to tell the whole story again and was lowered onto the Coast Guard eighty two foot trawler, Point something or other, stationed in Galveston. They took me back to the rig where my boat was waiting. Riding on the Coast Guard boat was more uncomfortable than my sailboat. It rocked so badly everyone held on to something to stand up and by now the weather was nice and the waves were small.

After the customary search of my boat and checking for a criminal history, the Coast Guard bosun's mate advised me they would tow me back to Galveston so I could make repairs. I thought this was a great idea. I could sleep while I was towed back. Not so. It turned out the Coast Guard guys slept and I bailed water because we were being towed too fast. When being towed at 10 knots with a hull speed of 6.4, water comes in at the cockpit drain in the rear. Oh well, I figured it was pretty nice of them to sail for seventeen hours to reach me, traveling some hundred and fifty miles out to sea. My steel oasis turned out to be about seventy five miles south of Louisiana about even with

New Orleans.

When we arrived at Galveston they let go the tow rope and I started the engine. We didn't know if it would work. It did and I docked beside the Elisa, a famous old, tall sailing ship. The Coast Guard followed regulations and wrote me a ticket for not having any emergency flares on board (because I used them all) and no port-a-potty, since we crossed the eleven mile line coming back in. The rules are you have to have a port-a-potty on the boat until you get past eleven miles where international waters begins.

That was OK with me; I'd rather pay the fine than the fuel bill and salaries for that eighty two footer, using over twenty five gallons of diesel an hour with a six man crew. That would have been about twelve hundred dollars just for the fuel. Later, the Jag officer called from Galveston and told me to forget about the tickets. I slept better that night than I could remember, tied to that dock.

Next day, Sunday, the same day I left Galveston a week before, I climbed the mast and untangled the main halyard and inspected the engine. I would not discover the reason the engine ran poorly until much later. At the time I didn't really care and just hoisted the sail and headed to Marina Del Sol. I figured my slip was still available. There was some obvious damage to the front of my boat. The bow pulpit was twisted like a pretzel where it tangled in the handrail of the rig. The blue roller furling was smeared with yellow paint where it hit against the same rail when the wave went down. When it went back up, the mast struck the bottom of the next deck and I didn't have a clue what damage was done to the mast. I sailed most of the way back to the marina some thirty miles with wind blowing a healthy twenty five knots. A couple times my boat almost broached because I was using too much main sail. Before I left on this ocean voyage that would have scared me, but now I laughed and just let out the main sheet to spill some wind and played with the boat.

I wasn't thinking what I looked like after a week not eating much, not sleeping or shaving. When I arrived at the boat slip in this dreadful shape, people stared. Dock mates were interested in what happened and what was next. The harbor-master, Beverly, said I could stay in my old slip as if I never left. They were very nice at Marina Del Sol. It took a while to repair all the damage to the boat but I enjoyed every minute of it. The joy of all this was

beginning to affect me somehow. I think tough times are needed before we can really enjoy or even recognize the good times.

I received \$5,000 from my insurance company to repair the boat, so I did the work myself adding a new Autohelm, new rigging and a new bow pulpit that a dock mate named Eric gave me. Eric lived on a 42 foot Cheoy Lee, ketch rig with two masts that was the classic sailboat. I'm sure he will actually go sailing one day and I wish him all the best.

Now I was armed with two Autohelms and it turns out two is the least a single-hander should have on a long cruise. I worked on the boat the entire winter and decided to get a crew even if I paid them to go along next time.

## The Gulf Part II

By the time I was ready it was some time in March 1993. The boat was in good shape with a new bottom job and some new radio equipment and rigging. I added a baby stay and a storm jib making it into a cutter instead of a sloop. So now instead of only one front sail, it carried two. Somehow after all the improvements, adjustments and paying ten prices at marine stores for simple items, I put nearly \$10,000.00 into this boat besides the \$15,000.00 I paid for it. I don't know where the money went, but I was worried about leaving on a trip with less than five thousand dollars. Little did I know there was no need to worry, there are no K-Marts and Boat US' floating around on the ocean, just Man O'wars and Sargasso weed. All you really need is a good water maker, solar panels and a comfortable amount of space. The water maker is a water system that strains the salt out of seawater making it into fresh water. They are fairly expensive and at the time I was getting the boat ready they were too expensive for my budget. So I depended on buying water or catching rain, which turned out OK for me since I spent so much time in anchorages where I could get it. It would be much better to have the water maker because it would allow freedom to stay in remote places almost indefinitely.

I agreed to pay Erica five hundred dollars to sail with me to Isla Mujeres, Mexico. She wanted to bring her boy friend along free and I agreed to that too, he was a very experienced sailor with many miles of single hand sailing behind him. They showed up at the dock about four hours late on the morning

of the departure. We planned to do some drills and let them get familiar with the boat before hand and this really made me anxious. Now after a couple years sailing myself, I understand there was really no need and I need not have worried. But then I didn't understand. Some of the dock people were ribbing me about it that morning and I was about ready to call off the trip. Now that I think about it that may have been the intention of some of the dock people as well. It's hard watching someone else doing something you always wished you could do and it's something you will not or cannot do.

Somehow I kept my mouth shut, and decided to go on with the trip. I really wanted something to go right. We sailed out of Marina Del Sol about noon one day again with people waving and well wishing us a good journey. The sun was up, there was a light wind and we were escorted by Arima, a 35 foot sloop occupied by Chuck and Lori Harvel, who later met up and sailed with me to Florida. We experimented flying the tri-radial spinnaker on the side like a drifter. It worked pretty well till the wind changed and we had to take it down. We reached Galveston that evening and didn't even slow down at the entrance to the ocean. We headed out to sea in the best direction we could make. It was something like due south. Naturally the wind died when the sun set and we motored a while to get past the area where the large ships wait for daylight to enter the Houston ship channel. After passing that place we got some wind and were able to sail again. It's really great having someone to talk with during a journey like that. The company was about the only good thing I remember from that trip because the weather was cold. It was cold and wet. No matter how many clothes we put on, we were still cold. We all put on a wool sweater, a coat, two pairs of jeans, gloves, hoods, raincoats and anything else we thought might keep us warm. Finally, we gave up and just sat shivering. The morning was welcome because it promised at least warmer weather. No so. The day dawned overcast and gloomy and the wind was still out of the southeast, the prevailing direction and the way we wanted to go. We tried all day to make some headway in the right direction. Usually that meant beating hard to windward. I really hate doing that. It makes the boat bounce a lot and makes most people sick. I began to feel a little queasy, so I went below and tried to get some sleep. I was not able to sleep since we left and I was getting really irritated. I began to imagine another week without sleep - oh no. I drank a large glass of wine before lying down to rest, thinking it might help

me drop off. That was a mistake. It was a nice Lambrusco, but it should have been a port, because I sprayed it over the port side about a minute after I lay down. That was the last time I was seasick and I actually felt a little better afterward. It did not help my agitation though, I wanted something to change but I didn't know exactly what. Finally, after determining we were only about a hundred fifty miles out, I decided to go back. For some odd reason this was easy and we reached Galveston by daylight. I will never beat to windward across the Gulf again if there is any other alternative. I gave both Erica and her boyfriend \$100.00 for the day and a half trip and I think they went camping. I went back to the slip and met my dock mates who wholly approved of my coming back. I decided next time and there would be a next time, I would go alone down the Inter Coastal Waterway all the way to Florida. I did not know what kind of decision I had made, but it seemed the only way.

### The I.C.W.

This time I left the dock there was no one around. They must have tired of seeing me off. Chuck and Lori were my faithful friends and Lori talked with me on the radio along with Frank, while I sailed to Galveston the day of my departure. Again the wind was blowing about 25 knots from the north when I left, but when I passed the shore onto the ocean it slowed to about 10 knots. This time I didn't bother to stop at Galveston but intended to sail right past like last time and hurry out to sea. While leaving Galveston in the distance I noticed three white boats parked near an oil rig about two miles from the jetties or Bay entrance. It turned out to be my friend Chuck, as he later related and we figured out. While we were sitting in a tropical paradise, he said, "I saw a blue sail boat headed east about 6:00 pm and I didn't know who else it could be but you." Apparently, not many people actually sail out into the ocean alone.

I sailed all night eastward, which is good for those who know the Gulf. Anytime you can make headway east you do it because the wind mostly blows from the southeast and most people want to go southeast. The Gulf of Mexico is a terrible place to sail because of the shallow water chop and the wind blowing the wrong direction or changing every hour to some other

direction, which causes a lot of work to occur if the boat has sails. But this was really a beautiful night with a light wind and the stars shining, a bit lonely though. Oil rigs passed left and right and I recognized some of them by sight and so realized I must have passed by them in the dark on my first trip. About midnight I decided to enter the I.C.W. and head for Lake Charles. I was getting tired and there was no particular hurry. I would also be able to just pull over and tie the boat to something and go to sleep whenever I needed. Approaching the entrance, I knew only from the charts, the wind died and I started the engine. This caused a problem. Starting the engine with the new Autohelm engaged caused it to get confused and it extended all the way out and jammed. By the time I could get it disconnected it was burned out. When I picked it up and shook it something inside was rattling around.

## Lake Charles

The old Autohelm still worked so I sailed with a good wind toward Lake Charles inside the river like channel called the Inter Coastal Waterway. It felt strange to be sailing with land on both sides. It took about half a day to reach Lake Charles and I met another boat that left the marina a day before me headed for the open sea and on to St. Petersburg, Florida. I later learned that he destroyed the engine motoring to windward across the Gulf. You cannot fight against the elements in the ocean. You can only work with them.

I arrived at Lake Charles in the early evening and docked at one of the docks with a lot of other boats. I was really tired and about all I remember is being greeted by a very nice man, I say that because he gave me a fresh grilled hamburger and a cold beer. I then went below and fell into wonderful sleep and didn't wake up till the next morning. Next morning I continued my trip. They wouldn't take any money for the nights stay so I filled up with gas at the marina station. I was off before noon traveling down this river path that would take me upwind with protection from the sea. During the next several miles traveling in Texas, I was introduced to the locks and bridges. Something that would become very familiar the next few months. Locks are places where the waterway is walled off and someone traveling has to go into a lock and wait for the water to lift them up or let them down on the other side. It's used to keep enough water in different parts of the waterway so the barges don't go



aground on what would otherwise be shallow places. The bridges are places where a road crosses over the waterway and there is some kind of bridge. Sail boats have to wait for the bridge master to stop traffic, open the bridge and allow them to pass because the mast of their boat is so tall.

Traveling down the I.C.W. is interesting with all the wildlife and landscape and water with no waves. It does, however, have water hyacinth, a strong current and huge barges that look like trains sometimes over 600 feet long. Any of these can mean the end of a fiberglass boat. The water plants will clog the intake of the engines and the engine will overheat. The current can slam any powerless boat into something and damage or sink it. The most exciting way to die is being squashed by the barges. They're so big, the little tug boats that push them look like toys in the distance. The captains were usually quite nice to me in the 'ditch.' They suggested where I should stop for the night, even if I didn't ask, and they nearly always replied to my radio traffic in a helpful manner. Evidence of out of control barges could be seen all along the waterway where trees were knocked down or pushed over.

The first day out of Lake Charles I passed the locks nearby and headed west. I didn't purchase charts for these waterways, but I used some place mats for the table that were pictures of charts already on the boat when I bought it. They showed where to turn to get where I wanted and that was about all I needed anyway. I headed for Inter coastal City, near Vermilion Bay, Louisiana. The weather was warm and the sun was out. I had installed a Bimini to shade the cockpit and it was nice to sit under that and watch the scenery drift by to the sound of the engine. I could set the Autohelm while looking at the farthest point up ahead and wouldn't have to adjust it for a long while. So I could go below and get things like food and drinks, or talk on the radio. The major concern was hitting a bridge with the mast. The rest of the time I kept on the right side to miss the barges. It seemed I was traveling about the same speed as them, which meant I wouldn't see many except the ones I met.

There were some deer eating beside the waterway at one point in Louisiana, when I passed they just looked and returned to eating as usual. It was times like this I began to feel life is good. There are places in this world so peaceful and natural I don't understand why no one lives there, or maybe that's why they're peaceful, because no one lives there. The scenery was

varied going through Louisiana from fields of crops, to Cyprus swamps, to cities. I didn't care for any of the cities and it was not possible to avoid them all. At Inter coastal City the boat needed fuel. I noticed a station and began making for it when a seaplane landed in front of me and pulled up first. Well, there's a first time for everything. I just kept going and found a Mobile station around the corner, operated by a nice fellow who let me tie up alongside for a while since there was a storm coming that night. They were very nice. I'd experienced all the storms I wanted out sailing in the ocean at night. Anyway, it gave me the chance to go to the store and pick up some things.

Next day, I stayed there because it was raining. You can't see in the rain and it would be unwise to sail with the barges when neither of you can see ahead. During my stay, tied to a steel bulkhead, the waves kept pushing the boat into the jagged metal and wood, so I put out one of my best fenders designed to protect the boat from damage. In the evening, the fender was destroyed, so I used some old tires lying nearby instead. Next day, I left again on my trip. The sun was up and I was anxious to change the scenery. My next town would be Morgan City, but it wouldn't be possible to get there in one day. I stayed in a hole or kind of pond to the right side of the channel where a river crossed. One of the tugboat captains suggested it when he saw me motoring along with the sun going down. There I cooked supper and watched Star Trek on a little black and white 12V television.

It takes a while to get used to living on a boat and any amenities like TV are good to help prevent culture shock. By now I was doing pretty well. Most people experience culture shock and get depressed from not having familiar things around them. It's the same with other sudden changes, but most obvious when changing to a new environment.

I noticed a strange plant floating in the waterways that turned out to be water hyacinth, a fairly common plant in South America and only now becoming prolific on the Gulf Coast. They are not bad plants, they clean the water and the Manatees love to eat them. But they clog the water intakes and cause boats to overheat, possibly destroying the engines. Powerboat captains hate them.

## Morgan City

It was a long leg to Morgan City and lonely. I only saw one or two boats on the way. The current was really strong approaching the city and my engine was struggling and spitting. I thought it was going to give up at any time when I noticed a Texaco dock near the Atchafalaya river, so, uninvited, I docked the boat. No one was around and it was getting late so I spent the night and tried to figure out what was causing the engine to run poorly. All kinds of bad things haunted me that could be wrong with it, but it finally started to run better. Next morning, the people showed up and wondered what I was doing there. I told them I was having engine trouble and they very kindly said I could stay as long as I needed. Around noon I gave up working on the engine and just decided to go for it. The river was running at nearly flood level and the current was 6.4 knots. I didn't see how I would go up stream with a boat that was rated at 6.5 knots, but I did. The guys at the Texaco dock said I should be able to make it if I stayed near the shore. I did that and sure enough I could hardly tell there was any current at all. I made it through the Morgan City locks and stopped at a little tavern someone told me about on the other side. It was a nasty little place. A man came out and told me I could only stay if I paid thirty dollars so, I paid him. A few minutes later an older man came out and gave the money back and said there was no charge. I stayed there till it was dark and went inside. There was no one there but the barkeep and me. I felt I should buy something from him, so I bought a couple beers and left.

I was anxious to leave that place and that town because it just didn't feel right. I followed another boat part of the day and caught them entering Houma, Louisiana. It was a 40' Valiant named 'Culmination.' Captain Roy Belew and Trish Leonard were having trouble with the intake getting clogged with water hyacinth. Roy replied on the radio he didn't need any help as I passed by. I docked in a little river in the middle of the town of Houma and later guided Roy in by radio. We enjoyed a nice supper on his boat that night and traded stories and agreed to sail together the next day. While we were there I noticed another boat moored closer to the center of town. It was smaller than mine but very nautical looking, with lots of expensive brass fittings and obviously of custom build. Dr. Richard Lawrence was traveling with a hired mate, a young man named David. He was delivering the boat somewhere in Pensacola Florida, he said. At the moment he was waiting for a part for the engine to arrive in the mail so they could continue.

## The Mississippi River

Next day, Culmination and Frontliner headed east again with fine weather and high hopes of finding a nicer place. It took all day to reach the locks on the Mississippi River and we spent the night in a canal, in a flooded field, a couple miles to the west of those locks. We left early and passed dozens of barges in line waiting to enter. They were very nice and let us go to the front of the line. I think it was more a desire to get us out of the way than one of special courtesy. It's probably well known that sailboat captains are often novices and they have very expensive boats and good insurance companies with lots of lawyers. And it would be really easy to mash a little sailboat to bits with one of those barges.

When we crossed into the Mississippi River I looked at my depth finder and took a second look. It was nearly 200 feet deep. The current was a good 7 knots and I was making 10 knots idling down stream. It would be very important to not miss the exit a couple miles away, since entire trees were rushing past in the water. If it became necessary to go upstream, one of those could easily sink my boat. Just beyond the Norman locks was a US Carrier Escort moored to something on the right. It looked like it was being cut up for salvage. The large guns were cut off to about three feet and it looked to be stripped. It was still an impressive sight to me, looking up at it.

Past the second set of locks, on the other side of the river, the channel led to an area of the Gulf Coast shore called the Mississippi Sound. I planned to stop somewhere and call some friends I knew from Marina Del Sol that were supposed to be in the area. There was a river to the right that would lead to a place called, Fisherman's Paradise, I could see on one of my charts, so I headed to it. The river looked more like a creek and there were shallow spots to avoid. Around the last corner before reaching the dock I lost the channel and went aground, hard aground. I could have walked in water knee deep around the boat. It took a while to get off the ground here. I put up all the sail and let the wind help. Then I throttled up the engine full power and it began to move. Finally doing this got me back to water deep enough to float the boat again so, I found the channel by process of elimination. Arriving at Fisherman's Paradise I discovered the docks were only wooden planks nailed

onto piles driven into the mud, but the place had an old nautical look to it. To my surprise they only charged me \$5.00 a day to stay there. I stayed two weeks. My friends were glad to see me and I was glad to see them. We enjoyed the time together again eating out and bringing each other up to date on past experiences. Sharing like this can save a lot of grief if you can learn from someone else. After eating about 30 pounds of crayfish in two weeks, I left for the next leg eastward. Getting back to the ditch was not too difficult and I was making good progress. By the middle of the day the engine began to run poorly again. This time it died I thought it would never start running. I even called the Coast Guard for advice. They said there was a little place a few miles away where someone might look at it. I was really getting worried now because I was anchoring in the waterway so if a barge came along there would be no way to move out of the path since the wind was blowing in the wrong direction. Then as suddenly as it stopped the engine began running fine. Now I was strongly suspecting something to do with the fuel flow.

## Earnies Restaurant

Tired, I went to the place called Earnies Restaurant the Coast Guard told me about near the city of Chef Mantur and docked. It was always nice to dock beside a new restaurant. There would be a chance to get some new food and meet some new people. I added a new, clear fuel filter but could find nothing wrong. Before leaving one evening, I was walking down the dock under the restaurant, when in motored the Schooner with Dr. Lawrence and David aboard. It was a welcome meeting and usually is when you meet someone familiar on a lonely voyage. I stayed to see if I could help them for three more days and we left together in case either of us had trouble again. While there, we enjoyed meals in the restaurant and one on the boat. There were some gambling machines in the little bar upstairs, so we tried them out. Like most gambling machines they took our money. The second day, David and I decided to take a walk to the nearest auto parts store. Someone said it was about four miles away. We got tired at about ten miles and turned back. The next day we found a way to drive and discovered it was over fourteen miles to that auto parts store. While walking along, we noticed something interesting.

There were the remains of small alligators and shotgun shells lying beside the road and in the ditches. It seems a common activity in those parts is to drive along the road and shoot alligators in the ditches, no doubt a nighttime sport.

Eventually we headed for the Mississippi Sound on the other side of Lake Borne to the east. The water is a distinctly different color east of the Mississippi River. This was the first time I saw blue water near the shore. We traveled together to Gulfport Mississippi in increasing winds. Mississippi Sound is a very nice place to sail most of the time. There are little islands with names like Dog island and Cat Island about a mile from the shore most of the way across the Sound and the water is usually clean and blue. The little islands are popular places to swim and sun bathe in the summer. But on this day the waves coming from the ocean were not being completely blocked by the narrow islands that protect the Sound. The waves were about four feet high in the ditch all the way to Gulfport. I was doing fine after reefing my sails, but Dr. Lawrence was taking it harder. I could see his boat behind leaning and they were scrambling here and there doing things on board. When we reached the channel entrance to Gulfport it was necessary to make a hard left turn and head down wind. I did this with no problem, but Lawrence nearly turned his boat over because he could not reef his sails and he was flying far too much canvas in that wind. We spent the night docked there for thirty pieces of silver. I thought thirty dollars for being tied to a post overnight a bit high. It was not without value though because it was here I noticed little black pieces of rubber in the new fuel filter I put on the day before. Now I thought what may be the trouble with my engine. Taking a cab to a nearby auto parts store, I bought some new neoprene fuel hose and replaced the fuel line. I then dissected the old one and discovered it was so decayed inside that pieces were coming off and clogging it from one end to the other. There were never any more problems with the engine running.

## Bear Point Marina

We left Gulfport and headed east again. The weather was nice and there was a light breeze with a few clouds in the sky. This leg of the I.C.W. was not as nice as the last and not nearly as scenic. We followed this water highway through hill and dale always motoring since you could never get good wind

and were always turning corners. Another day traveling took us to Bear Point Marina, Alabama, nestled in the piney woods of the coast land. It was not a bad place, in fact, it was here I began to feel much better about my possible success of completing this journey. There was a kind of joy in the air and things began to look different. It seemed like there was a different spirit over the land and sea. Whatever the reason, it was a much more cheerful trek from this point on. We stayed at the Marina overnight and left the next day eastward.

## Rod & Reel Marina

By the end of the day we reached Pensacola, Florida. This is a very scenic place. The beach is long and clean and the water is a nice turquoise color, clear enough to see through. Here the clouds, the wind and water dominate the world. They are usually so breathtaking compared to what was left behind travelers are stunned. I intended to stay here quite a while and wait for my friends sailing Arima. This was the best place I had ever seen. People come here to enjoy nature, the ocean and it is obvious why the beach is popular. Surprisingly, there are hotels right on the beaches, not just where the land meets the water. Here the beaches are surrounded by water like those little islands at Mississippi Sound. It's quite the vacation spot. I found a little place called the Rod & Reel Marina, perfect for my needs. The manager named, Les, was very nice and let me stay on a monthly basis as long or short as needed. The Marina is situated behind some condominiums and a restaurant called Rusty's. They serve mullet there that is simply delicious.

I got my first chance to do some underwater spear fishing off the beach across and near the entrance to the channel. It was great. I took some snapper and a crab my first time out. I was so proud I took them back to the boat and ate them for supper. I caught two flounder from the dock that were quite tasty and I bought a wooden dingy from a man I met on a cruising sailboat. After that I repaired and painted the dingy to match Frontliner.

## Richard from Possum Crick

There was always something interesting to do like meeting new people.

One day I noticed an interesting looking gentleman with a mustache and goatee, about in his seventies, on a boat docked near the office and not far from my boat. I walked over and said something nice like "that's a good dingy you have there." In fact, it was about half the size of his boat and very sturdy looking. He was on a Bayfield 25, a very sharp sailboat. He invited me aboard and we became friends immediately. He was a retired professor from the University of Arizona at Tucson. He had been working with the Navaho Indians on the reservation and could speak some of the language. He would often burst out with it at odd times. He was an odd fellow, but very likable. For several days we met and ate supper at the restaurant near the marina. He said he was diagnosed with cancer and required to retire from the university. Five years later he would discover this was not true and he still owned the boat. He was a good companion and a tough sailor. He related a story that I found remarkable. He said he was not experienced sailing, but he bought the sailboat anyway and left St. Petersburg Florida for the Dry Tortugas. He didn't know how to navigate or sail the boat but intended to learn on the way or die. He said there was no Autohelm and he steered all the time by himself. When it was necessary to go up front and change the sails or something, he would tie the tiller with a rope and go in slow circles until he finished. He said he became so tired at one point that he just forgot about the boat, went below decks and slept.

I told him I know how he must have felt. He always had lots of marks on his arms because his skin was tinder and would bruise and tear easily. You hurt yourself nearly every day on a sailboat. He liked being called Dirty Dick from Possum Crick, but I always called him Professor, partly out of respect and partly because it made me think of the characters on an old TV show called Gilligan's Island.

## Arima Arrives

This was the first really nice place I ever saw and I stayed well over a month fishing, diving and working on the dingy. One day I was expecting my friends from Marina Del Sol to arrive and was listening to the radio. Lori is a pretty girl with dark hair and Chuck looks like Clint Eastwood, they make a nice couple and not what you would expect to find on the high seas. Finally, I



was able to reach them. "Arima, Arima, Arima, this is Frontliner, over." I called them every thirty minutes. Then, I heard Lori, "Frontliner this is Arima go ahead." Ha, ha, they made it and a grand meeting was coming up. They were sailing for eight days from Galveston but the winds had not been good. The winds are never good in the Gulf. They experienced no wind for two days and a storm with too much wind one night and hard sailing close to the wind most of the way. Finally, they started the engine. The engine stopped several times and Chuck thought they ran out of fuel, since he didn't know how much fuel there was because the fuel gauge was broken and the tank fill was such that he could not put a stick down it to measure. The reason sailors don't like to use the engine is that's the only way to dock the boat if the wind is not in the right direction when they arrive somewhere, and it usually is not. The only alternative is to do like the sailors of old time and anchor off shore, paddle in with the dingy and bring the ship in when the wind changes. With other ship traffic, thieves or pirates around it's really not a good idea to do that, as I discovered when I left my boat in the Bahamas later on.

When they said they could see the entrance, I borrowed a hand radio and climbed my mast, intending to guide them in from about two miles away. I gave them all the essential information like; go past the first channel and turn left at the second and continue about a mile and we are on the right. The wind was blowing into the Marina so it was going to be difficult to dock without plowing into it. We discussed them anchoring the night and docking in the morning, but I let them decide. They decided to go for it. It was really hard. large sailboats do not maneuver well even in good weather and it was dark by now. Chuck managed to get docked with an impressive bit of motoring and tiller work all against the elements and the only damage was caused when the bow rail in front bumped a post, bending it a little. It was good to see my friends and I handed them a cold beer when we secured the boat.

It was then time we all got our boats ready for the next leg of the journey. Chuck and Lori worked on theirs and I helped with anything they would let me do. I was waiting on the new Autohelm to arrive from the manufacturer having finished my repairs and updates, so there was nothing else to do. We installed a topping lift on Arima. The topping lift holds the boom up while someone changes the sail at sea and Chuck worked with the Global Positioning System and the fuel tank. He was able to discover the tank

was large enough, all it needed was cleaning and venting. Both of which he was able to do before we left. I introduced them to professor Simpson and we all visited together for several days. We went to my favorite diving place and spear fished and swam in the clean, blue water at the beach. Better times began here.

We also met two very nice gentlemen from Alabama, Bill Williams and Ted Cook. While walking down the dock on the way to town, we asked directions from them. When they understood we had no vehicle, Bill insisted we take his Chevy Suburban and just handed us the keys. We were really surprised he would do that and it was a great help at the time. That was uncommon kindness. When we all got ready to leave and convinced the professor to not go to Texas, we traveled east together. It's a lot less lonely traveling with other people and you have some good times doing it.

We followed the I.C.W. from Pensacola headed for Apalachicola Florida. It would take nearly a week to make the trip traveling along about six miles per hour. The end of the first day found us anchored in a wide place in the channel that looked safe from other traffic. Chuck and Lori decided to anchor on the north side and the professor and I decided to anchor on the south side. During the night, a storm came and blew from the north so the professor and I wished we did the same on the north side of the channel with Arima. The bottom was not very good here and the tide went out in the night leaving us too close to the hard bottom. Both of us were shaken by the wind and could not sleep. About 3:00 am we both could feel the boats bumping on the bottom, so we pulled on the anchor lines to move the boats into deeper water. The Professor lifted his anchor and moved into deeper water, which was quite a feat in that wind and all alone on his boat. Next morning, neither of us got any sleep and my dingy was missing. I noticed it about a hundred yards aft, washed up on the shore. I called the professor on the radio and he brought his dingy over so I could fetch mine from the shore. Then we tried to figure out how to get his dingy back. The professor sailed so close by my boat that I was able to hand him the rope as he passed by. The professor was so tired he could not continue very far the next day. He said he was going to take his ease beside a K-mart store we spotted. All this communication was happening over the VHF radios on each of our boats.

Frontliner and Arima continued traveling east until the end of another

day. We reached the east side of Lake Catachwatchie, where we anchored on the south end of the lake. This time I went along with Arima and anchored wherever they decided. That evening the Harvels invited me over for dinner aboard Arima. They got out their newly equipped sailing dingy and tried to sail over to my boat. It didn't sail very well so I rescued them in my dingy with a small outboard engine. We decided the mast of his dingy needed to be cut down some to be able to sail. Later he would discover it worked. We were anchored in the small part of a lake where it met a channel so there was some protection from the wind, except from the north. Meal time is nearly always a happy time when you are on a journey. Everyone gets together and shares what they have, as on this night. Later that night the wind blew from the north again making it another bumpy night, but I got a little sleep. I think I was getting used to it. I don't think the Harvels got any sleep at all. Next morning we headed east again for another day of hard motoring. It took all day without stopping to reach Panama City.

## Panama City

We discovered a wonderful little protected lagoon just south of the Panama City Dock, where we found just enough room for about four sailboats. There was already one there, but we didn't see anyone at home all the while we were there. This was a picture perfect little anchorage protected on every side and we spent an extra day there for no reason at all.

One evening we were just finishing dinner aboard Arima and having drinks when we looked up and here came Puffin. The professor didn't recognize us and went about anchoring his boat until we shouted at him. He was delighted and wasted no time in coming to join us. It was such a surprise to see him again and we were delighted he was OK. Chance meetings like these will always be one of my fondest memories.

While we were in the little anchorage, I decided to try some stingray. There were plenty of them swimming around my boat so I waited on deck with my spear gun till they swam by. I took one and prepared it. Nasty is the only way to describe the results of my effort. It was really bad and if anything tasted worse, it must have been when we tried to eat a nurse shark. They're big and easy to catch, but they taste really bad.

Next day we were all off again headed for Apalachicola, Florida. The weather was pretty good except for a couple storms in the night during the trip. It was another long hard day of motoring down what was now a pretty narrow channel, but one with strange looking trees. They were thick and matted in places and unlike anything I was familiar with. I still don't know what they were but they looked similar to the mangroves of southern Florida.

When we reached Apalachicola, it was a little disappointing to not get to go to town, but we docked at a nice little place just before Governor's Cut and spent the night. Once again, we ate a grand supper in the restaurant there that served all kinds of fresh seafood. Chuck and I were contemplating the crossing over open ocean to Tarpon Springs and all the possible problems that could occur during that 150 mile jaunt in the open sea. We decided to listen to the weather the next morning and decide what to do then. Next morning, the National Weather Service said the winds would be 15 knots from the southwest all day. We decided to go immediately. It was a good thing we did because it is rare to get winds from that direction in the Gulf, or at least we thought so, us old sailors.

When we got our dinghies on board and everything ready to go, it was near noon. You always put the dingy on the big boat when crossing the ocean in case of bad weather or something causing it to be slammed into the back of your boat. In addition, it takes speed away from the sailboat dragging behind and everybody wants to get across fast as possible. I learned that the hard way later on when I lost a nice sailing dingy while towing it behind Frontliner in the Bahamas.

I went first down a channel to the cut that opened to the sea. Someone said there may be some shallow places near that point, and I found them. Frontliner went hard aground and would not move. After twisting it around with the engine and putting up different sails it came lose about the time I got sight of Arima.

It was not a bad crossing at all, but near the end of the trip the professor said oil was squirting from his engine and stopped to repair a broken hose. We kept in radio contact as long as possible and when we arrived we told the Coast Guard to check on him until he made it inland. He actually got to St. Petersburg before I did. I anchored just off the coast of Tarpon Springs behind a little island for the night with Arima. We intended to go to St. Pete the next

day, but I parked in a place that was a little too shallow. I really needed to stop doing that. I watched Arima leave and now we were all spread out again. After working with a kedge anchor and all the sails flying, I asked a fisherman in a small 14 foot boat if he would pass by going fast a few times to rock me off the bottom. He did and I was on my way again with no harm done. I went to Clearwater and docked at the Bel Crest Beach Resort for \$10.00. That was the last cheap rent I ever saw on a dock. Next day, I went around the corner and laid anchor behind the Don Caesar Hotel. It was a pretty nice place and there was a bus stop near by, so I went sightseeing. There was a market not far away and I was able to pick up a few things I needed for the larders. I found where the professor lived and went to see him in my dingy. We worked on his boat and installed a new boomvang and worked with his new global positioning system.

## Fred

After a couple days in that place, I decided to move to the place where Arima was docked. It was a nice little marina called Terra Verde near the opening of Tampa Bay. I spent the night there, but the current was so strong you could hardly come and go. While there we all went to the nearby store one morning for something like snacks. Anyway, while we were waiting for the place to open, there was a large, white bird, nearly five feet tall, that just swooped down and landed between us and the front door. He just stood there unafraid of us, so we just watched him. Shortly, the store opened and the bird went to the door and knocked with his beak. When the man opened the door, the bird went inside and stood at the counter. We followed him inside. It was a bait store and every morning when the owner removed the dead bait fish from the water, he put them on the counter in front of the anxiously waiting bird he named Fred. After Fred ate the fish, he walked over to the door and waited till someone opened it for him, then he walked outside and flew away. That's got to be the strangest arrangement I've ever seen.

I soon left there and anchored in a nice little bay a couple miles away. This turned out to be a resort place where people came to play, but it wasn't too bad. It was a lot less expensive too. The Harvels went somewhere to visit relatives and the professor was doing something much the same. I decided to

continue the trip alone and headed south down the I.C.W. until I reached a little dock called the Crow's Nest. It was a very small place but the water was so clear I couldn't resist stopping for a while. While there, I got out my spear gun, put on a dive suit and mask and slipped into the water to catch supper. It took no time at all before I speared a nice fish about four pounds. I took it to the boat, cleaned it and fired up the grill. This was another expensive place. They charged \$30.00 to park for the night. I figured it was not so bad if you include the fresh dinner and a nice little swim.

Next day, I left early down the I.C.W. headed for Fort Myers. It would take at least two days to get there, but I was in no hurry. I found a wide place where the waterway turned a corner late that evening and anchored the boat. There was a little squall rain cloud passing, so I battened down the hatches and waited for it to pass. When it was over I noticed another boat nearby. I got into my dingy and paddled over to meet them. They were a very nice couple, older than me and their boat was a 37 foot Morgan. They had much more room, or would have if not for all the stuff they packed into it. The next day we journeyed together in case either of us experienced any trouble. Sure enough, when they arrived at Fort Myers their engine went out. They left the boat at the marina and went off somewhere to get the Captain some long delayed medical treatment.

Fort Myers Marina sits just behind the Hilton Hotel. It's clean and convenient because you can go into the Restaurant at the Hilton. After a couple days here it was time to move on. I filled up with gas and headed to Fort Myers Beach on the ocean. There was an anchorage there with about two dozen boats anchored. Leaving Frontliner there I took the dingy to shore and walked around town for awhile and down to the beach. The water there was marvelously blue and clean looking with lots of people basking in the sun and swimming. This is obviously a tourist town. I spent about three days there until I thought it was time to move on. The next leg of the trip would have to be done outside the shore in the ocean - in the ocean, alone again. I was a little anxious about this for some reason.

I left about noon figuring it would take some 24 hours to get to Marathon, in the Florida Keys and I wanted to arrive with the sun high so I could see the reefs under the water in case my charts were off. In this way I could still navigate through them. It was really a peaceful trip in spite of my

trepidation. There was a light wind off my port beam, so I just sailed along and watched the water and sea creatures float past. At one point somewhere near Everglade City, I noticed a small cloud off to the right. There was a fishing boat under it that I could barely see. The next minute a funnel came down from the little cloud very near their boat. As I watched, something white began to appear in front of the boat and shortly, I realized it was white water being splashed by the boat moving quickly. It took very little time for the boat to reach and pass my location headed for the shore. They must have been a little shaken by that waterspout coming down beside them. I reefed my sail and continued on. Looking down, I was surprised by all the crabs swimming in the water. I didn't know crabs could swim at all, much less reach the surface, but there they were, baby crabs everywhere. They look funny swimming sideways.

Another fascinating thing I saw, while sitting on the front of the boat swinging my legs off the side and watching the water, were flying fish. I thought flying fish could only jump from the water and glide, then fall back. Not so. They actually do fly by flapping their wings. The boat surprised a school of them while I was watching and they sprang up like a covey of quail right at my feet and flew off in all directions. If they could not fly, but only sail along, they would have all gone the same direction. What's more, they flew about fifty yards only a foot above the water. What's even more, since I was right over them when they left, I could hear and see them beating their wings. Now the sun was beginning to set on the horizon and I could see big clouds up ahead. When the sun went down and it began to get dark there was lightning in those clouds. I knew there would be high wind and rain soon. Marathon was still about a hundred miles away and so was any other land. I reefed the mainsail all the way and rolled the jib up and secured it. It's important to protect that roller furling from damage in high winds. I started the engine and motor sailed along. A towel covered the Autohelm to keep most of the water off when the rains arrived and I went below into the main salon. The wind hit while I was below, so I just closed the doors and lay down on the couch. I was actually having a talk with The Lord. I was really grieving about this storm and all the lightning which never happened to me before. It was the most frightening thing I can remember. When I saw the lightning striking the water I tied a chain around the mast and let it down in the water

beside the boat. If the mast got hit maybe it would go down the chain instead of blowing the bottom out of the boat. Laying on that couch thinking about those scary looking clouds with all the lightning and waiting to get slammed, I noticed the sound had stopped. I looked out and all the clouds were somehow gone. It couldn't have been more than ten minutes. The wind was now light as if nothing had happened. Nature doesn't really do that. I will always believe The Lord did that. The water didn't get very bumpy because the wind had not blown very long and the water was not very deep. After the little blow was over, things were suddenly normal, the stars were back out and all the clouds were gone. I sailed till the morning as the sun revealed something on the horizon. It just looked like some dark spots at first, but as I got closer, I could see it was a bridge. I was arriving at Marathon. When the sun climbed higher so I could see into the water, I actually shouted out. Looking over the side of the boat, I could see rocks going by as clearly as if I were flying in the air, or the water was only a foot deep. I looked at the depth gauge and it said 15 feet, plenty of water. I stared at that for a long time trying to decide if I was running onto a shallow place or what. It turns out the water in the Keys is so clear you can't tell how deep it is all the time. This was a place I never even dreamed about before. I wondered what else I would find here in this other world.

## Marathon

The engine began running too hot, so I suspected a water flow problem. Examining the hoses and the clear water filter I installed just in front of the water pump, I discovered there were lots of little clear fish in the water filter. They were Glass Fish, a thing I never saw except in pet stores. It was a simple job to open the filter and remove the little fish, then the engine cooled to normal temperature. It was not easy to miss all the reefs clearly visible under the water and I realized if I didn't arrive when the wind and light were right, it would not have been possible. When I arrived at Vaca Key, pronounced 'baka key', there was a little rain squall coming through. There was a bridge blocking the entrance to the lagoon as I arrived which opened as I approached, so it was just possible to pass under the bridge and make it to a place in the anchorage, throw out the anchor and get below before the wind hit. It did not



last long, maybe 10 minutes and it was over. I put the dingy in the water and headed to a local restaurant for some refreshment. Boot Key Anchorage is really a lagoon the size of three football fields and roughly oblong. It's bordered about equally by houses, thickly matted water trees called Mangroves and some businesses, apartments mostly. There are many shallow places but it's mostly about ten feet deep. Water can come in and out through two channels and the water inside is fairly clean most of the time. There are usually about a hundred boats spaced around on anchor or moored.

Most of the money I spent during this trip went to restaurants. After being there awhile, I discovered all the best places and those to avoid. Most were good, but there was a guy at the Sombrero Resort Bar named Jim that didn't like people according to their looks. He was so anxious to charge people three dollars for docking their dinghies, a friend said he chased him, running down the dock shouting for him to come back and pay. I tried to avoid him as much as possible. I soon discovered another place to wash clothes and watch TV called Harborside. It was a small dock beside an old warehouse turned harbor, with washing machines, soda machines and a TV room. People would gather there in the evenings and watch TV, play games and visit. Much of the visiting there would also occur on sailboats in the protected anchorage. A common activity is to have sort of dinner parties on the boats in the evenings. It's really nice. There was even a church group that met on Sundays aboard a 35 foot ketch rig painted yellow and anchored near the middle of the anchorage.

From Boot Key, it's easy to go fishing since the Gulf Stream is only about six miles south, marked by the weed line. The weed line is Sargasso weed, a yellowish moss like weed with little yellow balls mixed in that keep it floating. It's not particularly nutritious, but it makes a good garnish for seafood dishes.

## Fish Story

After snuggling into a more comfortable spot one day in the anchorage, I decided to fish from my boat. I had some small fish called Sergeant Majors caught earlier that morning for bait and a good rod and reel purchased with this in mind long ago. Within minutes of setting the hook in the water, the reel

began singing. I discovered many fish in the ocean do not just nibble, they are really aggressive. I grabbed the pole and began fighting the fish, I was surprised how it pulled and when I saw it I understood. It was a shark as long as my leg. It was a nurse shark and I released it back into the water and rebated the hook. Within a couple minutes, it happened again. This time it was a macko shark with teeth that looked like electric hedge trimmers going full speed and a head that looked like a great white, but not nearly as large. This fish was only about two feet long. I just let it flip and wiggle at the top of the water until it got off. I really didn't want that guy in my boat. Next time, I caught a three foot blacktip shark. I knew from watching TV this fish was good to eat and I hoisted it up to the rail and managed to keep all my fingers while I cleaned it over the side. At least mostly over the side, it was a messy business. I learned something interesting here. About the only thing inside a shark is a long tube looking stomach, too simple looking to be alive. There were, of course, no bones and you can slice them any way you want. There was so much I went around and shared it with people on other boats since there was no refrigeration. Once again I fired up the grill and it was good day.

Another fish encounter happened while I was out snorkeling in the lagoon not far from my boat. Swimming in this anchorage seemed safe enough for a beginner like me, so I would often go after lobster and snapper there. One day I was swimming along with my spear gun at the ready when I looked to the right. All I could see were big, silver scales. The fish swimming beside me was much longer than me and must have weighed much more. I was a little shocked and I pointed the spear at him and pulled the trigger. It bounced off him without making a mark. He disappeared immediately with a swish of his massive tail. I think it was a Tarpon, there are lots of them in those waters. I don't know what would have happened if my spear actually went in him. I imagine it would have been a very eventful ride.

## Cuba

One day, I was getting tired of sitting around and decided I'd go to Cuba. After reading all about it in the Cruising magazines, I thought it would be a nice place to visit and I questioned several other sailors passing through who recommended it. Well, in some cases it may be, in others maybe not. I

completely forgot about discussing it previously with my friend Chuck, who told me a horror story that happened to one of his friends and ironically, the same thing would soon happen to me. Anyway, I lifted the anchor, put the dingy on board and headed south. Cuba is only about 90 miles due south and I soon discovered the value of trade winds. It was a beautiful sail in the moonlight with a constant 15 knot wind off the port beam, I made really good time and never had to touch the sails. About midway across, I noticed a ship moving slowly along. They hailed me on channel 16 and I responded. "Ahoy, this is the Senator", they said. I responded and found the mate very nice and asked if he would check his radar for weather in the area. He said there was nothing within 90 miles of us and I thanked him. He said I had an unusually strong radar signature for a sailboat and I explained that I installed 40 square feet of copper screen in the roof of the cabin to act as an RF ground for the Side Band radio. (radar keys on 90 degree angles, especially metal and there are lots of these in 40 square feet of copper screen wire). We said our adios and neither of us asked the other what we were doing out there. With a boat named the Senator, I didn't want to know what it was doing there or whose money paid for it. I went into the cabin feeling secure enough with the radar update and went to sleep. When I woke up it was getting light outside. I looked at the GPS and found I was only about 6 miles from Cayo Mono, one of my way points for navigation on Cuban soil. If I had not awakened, I would have hit the tiny island about 100 yards wide - pretty good I thought, from 90 miles away. I tried to hail the Officials but they would not respond in English, or they were asleep. So, I just followed some channel markers I saw and entered the Bay of Cardenas. I sailed along thinking about the 12 gauge shot gun I had on board. The more I thought about that, the more I really didn't want to have it. So, I threw it overboard along with all the ammunition.

A few miles farther I saw an old cement dock that looked like something from the Spanish American War and decided to dock there. There was a man fishing near the channel and I asked him, "Donde es el Captain de Puerto?" He pointed in the direction I was headed as if he understood my poor Spanish. Little did I know my Spanish would improve shortly relative to my need to communicate. When I got the boat docked, I walked over to another man and asked him the same question and he pointed to a building. I went there, entered the office and sat down in front of an official looking man, smoking a

cigar. He was on the phone and I just sat quietly and waited. When he understood I was from America and had just arrived, he looked up at the ceiling and sat back in his chair. Oops. It was clear I had done something wrong. Oh well, I was cheerful and answered all his questions as well as we could communicate. He sent me back to my boat and said to not leave or get off the boat. Next thing I knew, there was about thirty people standing around the boat, soldiers, citizens and sailors. Like they say, people came from miles around. From this I figured they must not get many visitors on this dock. Soon a doctor arrived with two nurses. He asked me several questions about my health then, sending the nurses off the boat he asked me how much I made in America. I didn't have the heart to tell him how much a doctor makes here. The average wage for a Cuban is about \$5.00 a month, if they are lucky enough to have a job at all. I gave the officers whatever I thought might help them at the time like fishhooks and soap and things like that. They had never seen plastic bottles. I felt sorry for them in some ways but they seemed to be happy people. I think our peoples could get along fine, it's our governments and the rich people behind them who are to blame for the fighting. After they searched my boat and waited for someone to make a decision, that took about 5 hours, they escorted me to Marina Gaviota. The soldier on my boat said it was "ultimo."

The toilets had no seats, there was no toilet paper and they turned off the lights when you left the restaurant. They said they were saving energy. The food was quite expensive there for tourists and at that time Cubans could not have dollars. They had to spend pesos. Tourists could only spend dollars. Now I understand it is different and everybody can use dollars. It will probably be much less safe for tourists now.

While I was there they landed a Russian helicopter near the Marina. I couldn't help but think it was for my observation. There were many Russian things like buses, planes and boats. What will always be fixed in my memory will be those 50 foot Russian Trawlers with the 50 cal. machine guns on the front. But that comes a little later. There were two Frenchmen walking down the sidewalk to the restaurant one day and I greeted them. When I saw they were French I said, in my best French, "Bonsuair je suie American, - hello, I'm an American. They laughed when they understood and said "Oh, oh, from TEXAS - alas, my accent. Then they invited me to join them and wouldn't let

me pay for anything. Years later, while traveling from Israel, I happened to have a layover in Paris for eight hours. Between what I knew of real life, TV and prices at Charles de Gaulle airport, I decided not to go into town and just sat in a chair at the airport till my flight was ready.

The officials that came to my boat said I needed to go into town and get a visa. The Taxi was identical to the car I left in Houston, a Toyota Corolla. The driver proceeded 90 miles an hour all the way to town dodging people walking and horse drawn carts, but no other cars. I was glad to get out of that car at the Ministry of Immigration. The Minister of Immigration spoke very little English and I spoke very little Spanish. So, he spoke broken English and I answered him in broken Spanish. The thing I remembered most was he said that I could go anywhere. I'm not sure he understood what he was saying. I took the little piece of paper and got back into the Taxi and went back to the marina. On the way I looked at the countryside. It is a very poor place. The towns are quite third world and farm animals roam everywhere. When I got back to the boat I was visited by an interesting fellow named, Leonardo. He was a good looking young man about twenty five. He could speak English, Spanish and Russian fluently. He said he trained in Russia to fly Mig fighters and he earned \$6.00 per month in his job here. He said he did not like the job he had. It was obvious he was some kind of intelligence officer but he never admitted it and I didn't approach the subject. He just kept saying he didn't like his job. I got the general idea. I gave him a book written in English and Spanish and we sat and talked a long time. They kept trying to get me to attend a dance at the marina put on by some dancing natives. I was afraid to leave my boat for fear they would plant some drugs on it and add it to the collection I could see around me. There were nine other sailboats, some bearing ragged quarantine flags, tied up in the little marina. They looked like they had been unattended for a long while, except the ones the officers take out with prostitutes for short voyages into the Bay of Cardenas. I didn't feel very welcome there and decided to leave the next morning. I bought a box of cigars for a friend named, Jerry, back in Texas for about the same price they would cost in Texas.

Next morning, I visited the Harbor master and asked how much I owed and if it was OK if I left. He said it was. I also found my friend, Leonardo and asked him the same thing. He said as far as he knew it was OK. Then, I

unhooked my ropes and left the marina. I had a strange feeling they knew something I didn't, anyway, I made good time and by ten o'clock I was over twenty miles north of Cuba. I was just sitting in the boat looking back when I noticed a white wave in the distance that did not disappear like the rest. The wind was about 15 knots off my starboard beam and the waves were about five feet high, perfect sailing weather. Soon I realized a boat was coming behind me. A single scan of the area told me it was not only coming toward me, but it was coming for me. There were no other boats in sight and no other reason to be running at that speed in five foot seas. They must have been taking a pounding. The first feeling I had was a kind of weakness and a hot sensation on the back of my neck. This was trouble and I had no where to go. I didn't dare use the VHF radio since they were monitoring it. I tried calling the Coast Guard on the international distress channel of the side band radio. No answer. I called again and again, still no answer. When I looked out again I could see the 50 cal. machine guns mounted on the front of the Russian Trawler bearing down on me. I quickly took down my sail and began lying a hull in the ocean. The big steel military boat came up fast and pulled along side. One of the occupants had what appeared to be a Kalashnikov assault rifle in his hands. I thought they were just going to kill me and take the boat. They are so poor and I had about \$3,000.00 U.S. currency on board and they knew it. Since they only make about 5 or 6 dollars a month, this would be a life savings to them. I tried to call the Captain on the radio both in Spanish and English but he would not respond. He came out of the cabin and shouted. "What country?" I grabbed an American flag and stuck it into place on the rear of my boat. He said, "I understand." Then he disappeared inside again. When he came back out, he motioned for me to raft up alongside his steel boat. In those five foot seas my boat would have been smashed to bits. I motioned with my arms indicating we should at least head into the waves. He got mad. He went back inside and had one of the mates dressed in ragged swimsuits come out and repeat the gesture. I then put my boat in gear and headed along side. The decks were heaving some five or six feet opposite each other. When I got to within three feet of his boat the mate came out and motioned me to stand off again. Since we could not stay together safely, I began to circle his boat so that one of us would have some control of his vessel. In a few minutes he came back out and shouted, "Go to Veradera."

This was the place I had just been where Marina Gaviota is located. I motioned in compliance and headed the boat south again. I put in the way point to Cayo Mono again and set the sails. This time it was not so easy as I had to sail closer to the wind. I motor sailed all the way. He stood off about fifty yards and watched me most of the way and about four hours later he disappeared. A small fishing boat intercepted me as I approached the way point programmed in my Global Positioning System. The men on board with assault rifles told me to follow them. They took an out of the way course back to the marina so that I thought we were going to some unknown and secluded spot where they could ransack my boat and kill me or throw me in prison. I had a long, serious talk with the Lord again all the way back to Cuba.

Finally, we arrived at the entrance to the marina and another boat came by and asked the one in front if I was under arrest. He said I was. When I arrived back at the slip I was in earlier, a siren wailed and a dozen soldiers assembled around the slip. I took a good look at the sky thinking it might be a long time before I saw it again. They motioned for me to back in again and this time, I did it on the first try. They did not bother to take off their boots this time or ask permission to come aboard. They searched the boat again and I began to think they had indeed placed something illegal on board the first time and this was only a little game to discover it and put me away. When the commanding officer sat down in the cockpit with me I asked him what the problem was. He said, "dragas", drugs. That didn't help my paranoia at all. Then he asked if I remembered what the Minister of Immigration told me the first day I came. I told him, yes, "El minister de immigration dice que yo puedo voy dondequiera." The Minister of Immigration said I could go anywhere. He shook his head as if he understood and said this is not the first time that has happened. I began to feel a little better with that remark, thinking they may be confused and maybe not know what the other is doing. It's entirely possible that is what happened. I noticed some of the employees were not very good at writing or adding and there's no telling what level of education the military has. I can imagine the chaos.

Suddenly, up came Leonardo and boarded the boat. He began helping us communicate and told them I was not a criminal and I was looking for a place to live. They spoke together for a while and suddenly they announced that I was going to get a reprieve and I could go. I had no idea I had broken the law.

I asked them if I could stay the night, since I was tired and perhaps leave in the morning. They said I could. So I went back in the restaurant and bought an expensive lobster dinner and paid for another to be given to Leonardo whenever he should come by. For some reason the prices didn't seem so high this time. What's more, I noticed I could look at something and know it's name in Spanish but not in English. During the night a man paced back and forth in front of my boat with a Russian assault rifle on his shoulder.

Next morning, about six soldiers and some officials arrived at 8:00 am. They brought rubber stamps and documents which they signed and stamped and had me sign and they said I could go. I backed Frontliner out of the slip and headed for the channel. All the soldiers, now about eight, were lined up along the bulkhead watching. They began looking at one another back and forth as if they did not understand what was happening. I later learned that two other Americans had been shot by the Cubans while I was there, some miles off shore when they did not stop their boats. As I was leaving I counted four Russian trawlers where before there had only been one. I made my way back to the open sea fully expecting to be accosted again by another boatload of Cuban fishermen bearing guns. When I got onto a heading that would take me to Florida I focused my effort on making the boat go faster. There was a good 17 knot wind off my starboard beam and every time the boat dropped below 7 knots I started the engine. I rarely had to do that since Frontliner was an old ocean racer and the last owner put about 5 thousand pounds of glass on the bottom that made her really fast. It took me 18 hours to get to Cuba. It took about 12 hours to get back. I arrived in American waters ten miles from Florida before dark the same day. All the way back I watched the waves on the horizon behind me. Every wave I saw on that horizon looked like a Russian trawler. I had a long time to think about that talk with the Lord and those confused soldiers lined up at the marina and how much help I had from higher powers. I will never forget the look of that Russian Trawler bearing down on me in a very lonely sea.

If there is a single lesson to be learned from cruising, it would be that you cannot depend on anyone but yourself and the Almighty watching over you. You hardly ever see another boat, so if an accident occurs or pirates accost you, you must be prepared. It's like the famous medicine man, Ni Chi, who said, " It is a good day to die", meaning his heart was right with his God.



## Arima Arrives Again

When I reached the Keys everything looked better somehow. There was a friendliness that came from everything I looked at. I wore red, white and blue for a week. I discovered my attitude had changed and I was a much happier person now. One happy day I was riding the Water Taxi in Boot Key Harbor when I saw a familiar boat enter the anchorage. It was Arima! I used the radio on board the Taxi and called, "Arima this is Frontliner over." Lori answered and we switched to channel 69, our old visiting channel and I explained where the shallow places were in the harbor. They invited me to come over when they were anchored and we would catch up on recent history. I had a lot to tell.

Later that evening I came up in my little blue dinky and tied to their boat. It was a grand reunion. We ate supper and exchanged stories all evening. They showed me the changes and improvements they made to Arima while at the dock at St. Petersburg and told of the visits they made to relatives living in Jacksonville. I described the events of my trip to Cuba and Chuck just shook his head and smiled. He told me not to go, but I forgot his warning. I guess it was just washed away by all the hoopla from the Germans, English, French and Canadians I met in the anchorage. They said it was a fine place to go and vacation. So I went. The only way I'll go back under that communist government is kicking and screaming. Later he thought it was funny when a helicopter came over the anchorage to call me and say, "They're coming for you, Ron.

We shared many fine evening suppers with new friends in Boot Key Harbor. One evening, after a day of snorkeling in the crystal clear water off the beach, Chuck and I decided to fish off the boat in the anchorage. I told them of the time just after I arrived when I caught four fish as long as my leg in about 20 minutes. We baited up with some small fish we speared that day and watched the pole. It only took a couple minutes before I felt a nibble. Soon, the pole began to bend steadily down. I jerked hard. Next thing I knew the rod bent and the reel began to sing. The drag was set pretty tight so this was a pretty big fish. I wish someone had taken a picture, it looked like the wide world of sports when the three or four foot fish topped the water and

began dancing on top several yards away. It must have been a tarpon, I understand they do that. Unfortunately, it went under again and got tangled in an anchor buoy and got off. We tried again and caught a four foot nurse shark. We decided to cook it up and see what it tasted like. Whew! Nasty is the only word to describe it. It tastes sweet, rotten and greasy all at the same time. I would have to be awfully hungry to eat one of those again.

## Ron The Chef

One day a 30 foot sloop slipped into the anchorage and laid anchor not far away. Before long we had occasion to meet him, I believe he came over to Chuck's boat and gave them some food or something. Anyway, it ended in a regular visit by several of us to his boat nearly every day. He was the best chef and a really nice guy. He had Bose acoustic speakers on his boat and the inside was outfitted like a commercial kitchen. There was a gas refrigerator and a large stainless steel cook stove that took up one whole side of his main cabin. He had a well stocked liquor cabinet and some wonderful recipes from all over the world. Here is where I learned about Tabuli, a dish made in Lebanon from Bulgar wheat with lemon, olive oil, tomatoes, onion, salt, pepper and water that requires no cooking. It's wonderful and I've made lots of it since then and shared it with lots of people. On the down side, little did I know that meeting Ron would be the beginning of the end of my cruising, because it was on a trip with his Sagona that Frontliner became trapped. That comes at the end of this story.

It soon became 'bug' season in the Middle Keys. That means the Lobsters were in season. We all bought fishing licenses and outfitted ourselves with the traditional weapons of lobster hunting; a short stick and a net. There are a lot of regulations surrounding lobstering in Florida. One obscure law I discovered cost me \$210.00. While fishing near a small island off the beach at Marathon, I took a lobster and cleaned it in the water. When I came up from a dive around the back side of the island I noticed a Marine Patrol boat floating near my friends. Anxious to use my expensive fishing license, I approached them. The officer on board asked me if I had anything. I responded I did and exhibited the lobster tail. Shortly, he was writing a ticket and explaining it is illegal to clean fish in the water. I asked him what about people who live on

the water. He had no answer. I decided that Florida was like everywhere else in America, as long as fat merchants make the laws, the laws will rarely accommodate reality. The friendliness that surrounded everything after arriving from Cuba began to fade away again.

We hunted those bugs everywhere and it was great fun catching supper many times. I confess, after being fined under that unforeseeable and obscure law, I worked harder at catching the little critters. In the end, I think I got my money's worth. I discovered 'ghost traps'. Lobster traps that have lost their buoys or snagged and gotten dragged to a different place by a boat and lost their buoys. It seems traps like these are free game for the finding. I found two or three. In the open water a lobster can only make three runs. The length of each run is determined by the size of the lobster. If they don't go too far, or if you have on diving gear, you can chase them each time. Then, they cannot run again for some time until they recharge with oxygen, so you can just pick them up.

There are many ways to cook lobster. I would often just pop a tail on top of linguine that was cooking and let it be steamed. That was one of my common lunches. Other times, I would put a little Louisiana Seafood Seasoning, that I picked up in Louisiana, into a small amount of water and steam them, which added a nice flavor.

Life in Boot Key was good. There was always something to do like go to the nearby TiKi bar at Sombrero. There you could trade books and buy good Round Rock beer. For lunch they served a good sandwich and other things for a reasonable price. Another bonus is there is no telling who you might see there. One night I was coming from doing something on the other side of the place when I noticed a familiar face. It was a dock neighbor named Billie from Marina Del Sol in Texas. She and Jerry stopped by on their way back from the Virgin Islands. It was nice to see them again and made the world seem like a smaller place. I later heard they blew out the mainsail of their 41' Morgan on the way back to Galveston. Stuff happens. They are nice people and both teach school. Part of the time they live on their boat and part in their motor home. They sold their house like wise parents of grown children.

Two times in a year I saw someone from Marina Del Sol in Boot Key Harbor. There was a young couple living on a trimaran named Tiffus and Michelle who came from Clear Lake, Texas. At least they were there when I

left and now they were here in Marathon. Too bad they were on the other side of the anchorage and we didn't get to spend much time together. There was always someone new coming along.

One day I looked up and two boats were entering the anchorage. One was a large Bayfield and the other was a Morgan 28. I was watching the Morgan named Thursday's Child. The captain was a pretty girl named Linda Taylor with long, dark hair and about 28 years old. She was strong and healthy looking. She just returned from Japan teaching English. She was a diver, a sailor, a teacher and probably lots of other things I didn't get to know. I was impressed that she could speak Japanese. The next remarkable thing about this girl was that she was alone on the boat. Not many people single hand a sail boat. She sailed to the Keys from St. Petersburg, Florida. I was lucky enough to visit and go bugging with her a couple times before she disappeared. I will always wonder what happened to her but I know she can take care of herself.

There were always new boats entering the anchorage and new people to see and meet. I can't begin to name them all here and it would be too boring to a reader if I did. But it should be noted that the most interesting people I have ever seen were on adventures of some kind. An old and very wise person told me something once that I believe is true. She said, "don't collect things, don't chase money too hard and live every day like there is no tomorrow." It works for me.

One day I was relaxing on my boat after running to the Post Office and back. I looked up and saw a local resident named Sarah approaching in her flat, long motor boat, standing as usual. When she arrived, she wanted me to go with her catching lobster. I did and we had a good time chasing bugs around the rocks underwater and we caught several nice ones. At one point, I was after a really big one that went into a hole in the rocks under water. The hole was big enough for me so, in I went after it. When I was entering the hole I noticed some spongy, reddish looking stuff growing on the rocks near the entrance. I don't remember if I got the lobster, I don't think I did, but I remember very well brushing my bare chest against the fire coral at the entrance to that hole. It didn't hurt that much when I did it but for the next three months it was like having a non stop case of poison ivy. My chest would blister everyday and I would scratch.

An older man named, Al, told me about a common remedy he knew and used that helped a lot. He said to put ammonia directly on any wound and it would clean it and keep it from becoming infected. That probably kept me from going to the hospital. I bathed in ammonia for three months and I never got close to any more red looking rocks underwater again. While Al was recovering from a fall of about six feet onto jagged coral near his boat, I first noticed him sitting out one day under a small tent drinking vodka. Always eager to meet new people I sat down and began talking with him about things when I noticed several red places on his knees where the coral reef cut to the bone. His knees were not swollen or discolored, it just looked like red Jello in places on them. When I asked about it he said he fell on the coral reef beside his boat the day before. I asked why they were not swollen by now and then he related his knowledge about ammonia. I was amazed and I've been using it since then. Al was an interesting fellow with his obviously Aztec wife who spoke no English. So when I visited He spoke English, I spoke broken Spanish, and his wife spoke south american Spanish. He said he was living in Chile with his wife and children on a balsa wood farm. He told a story which I could have only believed coming from someone like him, intelligent and capable man that he obviously was. He said he owned the balsa wood plantation and was about to sell a million dollars worth of wood, already floating in the river and ready for delivery. But apparently some one else was eyeing that wood for some time. As he was just about to ship the product down river, a small army of guerrillas showed up and killed all his employees and some of his children. He said only one daughter, he and his wife escaped. Naturally, the soldiers took everything. I felt bad that he was reduced from a man of substance to one living from week to week on his 34 foot sailboat and drinking too much. He worked at various jobs around the small town of Marathon and taught Spanish as a second language part time. It has been my observation through life that the most interesting people are poor in the eyes of the world but rich in intelligence and experience. I further conclude that when it comes time to die, and it surely will, it will not be much of a shock to those who have really lived.

Freedom

There is a kind of freedom to be had while cruising that is better than any feeling I know. There is no phone, no bills and many people don't remember what day it is. It doesn't matter. You live by the weather patterns and by the seasons when cruising. In certain seasons it is time to go south. While at other times north is the best direction to go for the best weather. The most important things to consider day to day are the supply of fresh water and what to do with all the time. There is always some work to do on something, but then, depending on your schedule, it is usually time to play.

One day I met a lady named Jane who was retired from American Airlines. She was in her late sixties and had the spirit of a teenager, What a lovely lady. She sailed down from upper Florida and did so every year in order to spend the winter in lower latitudes. My group of friends was always changing and I began including her in my visits. One evening we decided to go to the local bridge club and compete in a game of duplicate bridge. We won some silver points and had a wonderful time. Jane was such a gracious lady, we could probably have won first place, but she kept allowing people to redo their bidding after I let them fall into a trap. But we didn't even take the points we won since it didn't matter to either of us. She was the last new person I met before going on my journey to the Bahamas.

## The Bahamas

Another man I met, retired from teaching school, and was now sailing around on his boat became part of my little group along with Ron the Chef. Ron was gone for several months and was now back so we were having gourmet meals again on his boat. The three of us debated about going to the Bahamas over meals in the evening. It was a good life. I bought another dingy from some neighbors for \$300.00. It was a fine sailing dingy and by far the best I ever had. I gave my old one to a guy living on a small sailboat and working construction.

There was no reason to stay around Florida, since Chuck and Lori went south, aiming for Marsh Harbor and Linda went north to St. Petersburg. So I decided to go with Ron and the shop teacher (I can't remember his name.)

The time finally seemed right and we went to the store, loaded water and did all the things you do before going on a trip in a sailboat. I painted my

dingy, put a few things in the food pantry and cleaned the bottom of Frontliner. She was usually ready to go without much work. Then I put the dingy on top of the cabin for the trip the next morning.

Next morning, we were all ready and lined up at the fuel dock just to top off our tanks. We left Marathon at about eleven in the morning. Sailing NE we spent the night near Alligator Key within sight of Key Largo. My roller reefing jammed in the evening and I had to stop and fix it, so we decided to just spend the night there and cross the Gulf Stream the next day. Another problem my boat was falling behind the others. This was something I couldn't understand since I always found my boat out in front. When we anchored I jumped over the side to look at the bottom and figure out why Frontliner was sailing so slowly. There it was, the bottom was not clean. I tried to clean it in the water in Boot Key harbor but somehow, within one day, lots of sea things had reattached to the bottom. Or it could be I was too anxious to get out of that shark infested harbor water and just did a poor job, either way, I cleaned it off good this time so when we left no one was able catch me.

That evening we were all tired from the day's sail and anchored within sight and dingy range, but not too close for fear of dragging and colliding in the night. There was no one else around so I took a bottle of soap into the ocean. When I looked up the other two were doing the same thing. After our baths we all met at Ron's boat for a traditional supper and plans for the next day. I was really nervous, but I didn't know why and there was no apparent reason. I wanted to leave about noon the next day so we would arrive at the Bahama Bank when there was some light. The shop teacher wanted to leave earlier so we left about ten. Sure enough, we arrived at the dangerous place called Riding Rock about two hours before daylight. If the wind got up we might have crashed on the rocks. But the weather was fine and the wind was light and we just went in circles until the sun came up. We decided to anchor there and tried to rest after the long trip across. While there we saw a Bahamian fisherman who suggested we enter at a certain place and anchor so we would have some cover from the swell of the sea. We did and we could have lost all our boats for listening to his advice. His name was captain Brown.

I tried to sleep but I could not. So I decided to go diving and check out the fish in the area. The rules were different here and it was permitted to eat

all the conk you wanted. I've never eaten any that I liked. I wanted some of those giant lobsters I heard so many stories about. I didn't find any but I did get to swim with a hawksbill sea turtle. I saw it swimming past so I swam fast and caught up with him and we went side by side until I got tired of it.

There were lots of fish swimming around and it's such a wonderful place underwater there. There is a freedom that is noticeable in nature in a remote place. I imagine it would also be in other remote places of the world.

A storm came in the night and two of the boats dragged anchor and moved west. I stayed where I was behind my 35 lb plow anchor. I will always believe in having more anchor than you really think you need. If you go cruising a time will come when you will wish for more.

When daylight came the front was still blowing strong. We discussed what to do and decided to move away from the rocks where we anchored. I left first and circled for a while. The others said for me to go on and they would catch up. The shop teacher was having trouble raising his anchor. I sailed close to the wind for a few miles and could not see my two friends. So, I stopped, laid anchor and waited. It was about lunch so I jumped into the water and went after some lobster. There was none to be found on the barren little piece of sand bar where I anchored. Everything was difficult in the high wind conditions so I climbed up the ladder on the back of my boat and called my friends on the radio. They answered and wanted to catch up with me so I waited. In the evening I called them back and they said they were going to anchor just within sight of me about two miles away. So we waited for three days like that, all bouncing in the high waves. Every few hours it was necessary to go out and look at the anchor ropes to see if they were wearing away. To keep this from happening we put a short length of split water hose, held with plastic ties, every place the ropes rubbed. Still, the water hose could come off or slip and the ropes would wear into within minutes. The best thing to use for anchor rode is chain, but that's hard on the hands and requires a special wench. The rope is relatively cheap and can be used on any of the winches on the sailboat.

Finally, on the fourth day and after the second unreported front was passing, I suggested we go to Cat Key and rest up before continuing. My friends said they would come along behind. So, I left with a good following wind and arrived there before dark. It was treacherous with all the reefs and



sandbars to avoid and I wished I never went there. I was just finishing supper when I arrived and managed to steer around all the reefs by guessing from the pictures in the cruising guide. As I would soon discover, that was the only record of some of those waters.

I soon discovered a small cove on the NE end of Gun key called Honeymoon Cove. It was protected from the SE wind and calm as could be. That night I slept wonderfully for the first time in a long while. Soon I discovered the honeymoon was shorter than I expected. The place, like the name, is lovely - till the wind changes, then the honeymoon is over. When the wind swings around to the NE during a front or a storm the honeymoon turns to hell. They ought to call the place, Honeymoon Hell. I did not guess there would be not one, not two, but three consecutive, unreported fronts strike the Bahamas in mid March. But it happened and I was trapped in a really nasty little place at the end of Gun Key. I was not alone this time, there was a retired dentist whose name I do not remember there with me. We both waited too long to leave and we were going to have to try to exit through the reef on the other side. This is when I discovered there are no charts of that place, neither on the British Admiralty or the US Navigation charts. Uncharted waters only fifty miles from Miami, Who could have guessed? They simply left out that section of the chart. That left only one course of action, we had to gather all the information we could from available sources and quickly. The local Yacht Club on Cat Key, owned by the Mafia, referred us to a local captain named James Brown. He gave us some directions and we looked at the water and we snorkeled the most dangerous part but didn't put out any markers. Finally, I decided to try it first since my boat cost far less than the other one. I hauled in the anchors and started off in the direction that would get me to deep water sooner. Trouble is, the waves took me sideways faster than I could make headway forward and onto the reef I went. It was like being dropped about three feet onto a concrete deck. I fell down in the cockpit and things went everywhere. The water jugs I had strapped to the table broke loose and spilled some water into the cabin floor. I was sure the bottom was knocked out. I tried to steer with the next wave so maybe she would not hit again. The next wave took the boat clear of the narrow reef and into deeper water. I thought about fire so I quickly turned off the main power switch. Then I went back outside and up front to the anchor. I was drifting away from the

island and out of swimming distance, so I dropped the anchor and watched the chain rifle out to the end where it was secured to the anchor base. Then I made a mistake. I let the line out past the end of the chain and tied off the rope so it would be longer, without putting any chafing gear on it.

I can't remember when I called the Coast Guard, but I did. I think it was just after I hit the reef and saw the water in the cabin floor. If you are going to call for help you have to do it while the radio is still above the water and while the battery still works. If you don't sink you can always call back and cancel, but if you wait too long just to be sure, well. They kept calling me on the radio and asking questions. Finally, I told them I was not sinking and everything was OK. It was all I could do at the time and didn't have time to talk to anybody. When I made that call, several other people responded; a fisherman named James Brown and the Dentist in his dingy.

The Dentist came up along side and offered to take me off the boat. At this point, I was really tired of being on board and I accepted his offer. We almost lost the inflatable dingy trying to get back to his boat. The waves were so high, we could not get over them. Several times we would just get to the top of one and be thrown back almost going over backward. Finally, after getting the dingy filled with water and falling out, we used the island as a sea break and came up down wind behind it. Then we dragged the dingy across a little beach and put it back in the water on the calm side. We then proceeded to destroy the propeller of the motor by hitting the reef in the shallow water. After replacing the pin and getting everything back in, we made it to his boat. After sandwiches and a rest, arrangements were made to have Capt. Brown come get my boat and show the Dentist how to get out of the trap.

Shortly, his boat arrived from two miles away to pick me up and lead the Dentist out. Soon as I was aboard my boat, I looked at the anchor rope hanging by only one of the three strands. I tried to pull the rope up a little but the waves kept me from doing that. The tension on it was tremendous. When I saw blood on the rope I knew I was pulling as much as I could. Then the rope broke and I was drifting. Captain Brown was able to chase me with his boat and I tossed him a rope to use to tow me to the Marina. When we reached the marina, two miles away, first thing I did was jump over the side and examine the bottom. I was surprised there was very little damage. There was only a small chunk knocked from the keel about the size of a dinner plate and a crack

around the keel caused when the boat flexed. It was still not leaking but I could see light through the bottom of the keel where the fiberglass was now very thin. The rudder, screw and the braces were all not touched. I thought the shaft might be driven into the engine when it failed to start, I forgot about turning off the main switch. If the last owner had not beefed up the bottom Frontliner would be at the bottom of the shallow sea near Gun Key.

Captain Brown wanted two hundred fifty dollars for towing me two miles. I didn't care at the moment, so I traded him my \$800.00 Garmin GPS unit and showed him how to use it. I also gave his crew a few nice things and told him he could take whatever he wanted from the boat if he would keep it here and sell it for me. I signed the title to him and asked him to send me half the money. I guess he was pretty honest for not just taking the boat. Later, he charged my friend \$1,700.00 for storage and the boat had been stripped of about ten thousand dollars worth of gear.

I was really tired of being alone and ready to see some people I knew. So, I bought a ticket on the little island hopper that landed there on Cat Key and left for Miami. When I reached the plane, a small twin engine, I noticed the pilot looked just like Suzanne Summers. She was a petite girl with a big smile and she laughed a lot. She did not look at all like a pilot. Next, I noticed the runway was really short. In fact, if the wind is not blowing enough they can't land. She put on the brakes and throttled up the engines till the plane was shaking all over. Then the end of the runway began to approach quickly, too quickly. She didn't rotate the plane off the ground really, it just ran off the end of the runway into the air. At Miami International Airport they charged me \$600.00 for a one way ticket to Dallas Fort Worth Airport. The ticket man said it is expensive when you want to go right now. I began not feeling so well, specially when I discovered he sold me a ticket on a flight that left about 10 minutes before I got to the counter. Welcome home.